THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENCE FICTION

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CHAPTER I

THE FINDING OF THE COPPER CYLINDER

It occurred as far back as February 15, 1850. It happened on that day that the yacht Falcon lay becalmed upon the ocean between the Canaries and the Madeira Islands. This yacht Falcon was the property of Lord Featherstone, who, being weary of life in England, had taken a few congenial friends for a winter's cruise in these southern latitudes. They had visited the Azores, the Canaries, and the Madeira Islands, and were now on their way to the Mediterranean.

The wind had failed, a deep calm had succeeded, and everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, the water was smooth and glassy. The yacht rose and fell at the impulse of the long ocean undulations, and the creaking of the spars sounded out a lazy accompaniment to the motion of the vessel. All around was a watery horizon, except in the one place only, toward the south, where far in the distance the Peak of Teneriffe rose into the air.

The profound calm, the warm atmosphere, the slow pitching of the yacht, and the dull creaking of the spars all combined to lull into a state of indolent repose the people on board. Forward were the crew; some asleep, others smoking, others playing cards. At the stern were Oxenden, the intimate friend of Featherstone, and Dr. Congreve, who had come in the double capacity of friend and medical attendant. These two, like the crew, were in a state of dull and languid repose. Suspended between the two masts, in an Indian hammock, lay Featherstone, with a cigar in his mouth and a novel in his hand, which he was pretending to read. The fourth member of the party, Melick, was seated near the mainmast, folding some papers in a peculiar way. His occupation at length attracted the roving eyes of Featherstone, who poked forth his head from his hammock, and said in a sleepy voice:

"I say, Melick, you're the most energetic fellah I ever saw. By Jove! you're the only one aboard that's busy. What are you doing?"

"Paper boats! By Jove!" said Featherstone. "What for?"
"I'm going to have a regatta," said Melick. "Anything to kill time, you know."
"By Jove!" exclaimed Featherstone again, raising himself higher in his hammock, "that's not a bad idea. A regatta! By Jove! glorious! glorious! I say, Oxenden, did you hear that?"
"What do you mean by a regatta?" asked Oxenden, lazily.
"Oh, I mean a race with these paper boats. We can bet on them, you know."

At this Featherstone sat upright, with his legs dangling out of the hammock.
"By Jove!" he exclaimed again. "Betting! So we can. Do you know, Melick, old chap, I think that's a regatta! and we can bet on the best boat."
"But there isn't any wind," said Oxenden.
"Well, you know, that's the fun of it," said Melick, who went solemnly on as he spoke, folding his paper boats; "that's the fun of it. For you see if there was a wind we should be going on ourselves, and the regatta couldn't come off; but, as it is, the water is just right. You pick out your boat, and lay your bet on her to race to some given point."
"A given point? But how can we find any?"

"Oh, easily enough; something or anything--a bubble'll do, or we can pitch out a bit of wood."

Upon this Featherstone descended from his perch, and came near to examine the proceedings, while the other two, eager to take advantage of the new excitement, soon joined him. By this time Melick had finished his paper boats. There were four of them, and they were made of different colors, namely, red, green, yellow, and white.

"I'll put these in the water," said Melick, "and then we can lay our bets on them as we choose. But first let us see if there is anything that can be taken as a point of arrival. If there isn't anything, I can pitch out a bit of wood, in any direction which may seem best."

Saying this, he went to the side, followed by the others, and all looked out carefully over the water.
"There's a black speck out there," said Oxenden.
"So there is," said Featherstone. "That'll do. I wonder what it is?"
"Oh, a bit of timber," said Melick. "Probably the spar of some ship."
"It don't look like a spar," said the doctor; "it's only a round spot, like the float of some net."
"Oh, it's a spar," said Melick. "It's one end of it, the rest is under water."

The spot thus chosen was a dark, circular object, about a hundred yards away, and certainly did look very much like the extremity of some spar, the rest of which was under water. Whatever it was, however, it served well enough
for their present purpose, and no one took any further interest in it, except as the point toward which the paper boats should run in their eventful race.

Melick now let himself down over the side, and placed the paper boats on the water as carefully as possible. After this the four stood watching the little fleet in silence. The water was perfectly still, and there was no perceptible wind, but there were draughts of air caused by the rise and fall of the yacht, and these affected the tiny boats. Gradually they drew apart, the green one drifting astern, the yellow one remaining under the vessel, while the red and the white were carried out in the direction where they were expected to go, with about a foot of space between them.

"Two to one on the red!" cried Featherstone, betting on the one which had gained the lead.

"Done," said Melick, promptly taking his offer.

Oxenden made the same bet, which was taken by Melick and the doctor.

Other bets were now made as to the direction which they would take, as to the distance by which the red would beat the white, as to the time which would be occupied by the race, and as to fifty other things which need not be mentioned. All took part in this; the excitement rose high and the betting went on merrily. At length it was noticed that the white was overhauling the red. The excitement grew intense; the betting changed its form, but was still kept up, until at last the two paper boats seemed blended together in one dim spot which gradually faded out of sight.

It was now necessary to determine the state of the race, so Featherstone ordered out the boat. The four were soon embarked, and the men rowed out toward the point which had been chosen as the end of the race. On coming near they found the paper boats stuck together, saturated with water, and floating limp on the surface. An animated discussion arose about this. Some of the bets were off, but others remained an open question, and each side insisted upon a different view of the case. In the midst of this, Featherstone's attention was drawn to the dark spot already mentioned as the goal of the race.

"That's a queer-looking thing," said he, suddenly. "Pull up, lads, a little; let's see what it is. It doesn't look to me like a spar."

The others, always on the lookout for some new object of interest, were attracted by these words, and looked closely at the thing in question. The men pulled. The boat drew nearer.

"It's some sort of floating vessel," said Oxenden.

"It's not a spar," said Melick, who was at the bow.

And as he said this he reached out and grasped at it. He failed to get it, and did no more than touch it. It moved easily and sank, but soon came up again. A second time he grasped at it, and with both hands. This time he caught it, and then lifted it out of the water into the boat. These proceedings had been watched with the deepest interest; and now, as this curious floating thing made its appearance among them, they all crowded around it in eager excitement.

"It looks like a can of preserved meat," said the doctor.

"It certainly is a can," said Melick, "for it's made of metal; but as to preserved meat, I have my doubts."

The article in question was made of metal and was cylindrical in shape. It was soldered tight and evidently contained something. It was about eighteen inches long and eight wide. The nature of the metal was not easily perceptible, for it was coated with slime, and covered over about half its surface with barnacles and sea-weed. It was not heavy, and would have floated higher out of the water had it not been for these encumbrances.

"It's some kind of preserved meat," said the doctor. "Perhaps something good--game, I dare say--yes, Yorkshire game-pie. They pot all sorts of things now."

"If it's game," said Oxenden, "it'll be rather high by this time. Man alive! look at those weeds and shells. It must have been floating for ages."

"It's my belief," said Featherstone, "that it's part of the provisions laid in by Noah for his long voyage in the ark. So come, let's open it, and see what sort of diet the antediluvians had."

"It may be liquor," said Oxenden.

Melick shook his head.

"No," said he; "there's something inside, but whatever it is, it isn't liquor. It's odd, too. The thing is of foreign make, evidently. I never saw anything like it before. It may be Chinese."

"By Jove!" cried Featherstone, "this is getting exciting. Let's go back to the yacht and open it."

The men rowed back to the yacht.

"It's meat of some sort," continued the doctor. "I'm certain of that. It has come in good time. We can have it for dinner."

"You may have my share, then," said Oxenden. "I hereby give and bequeath to you all my right, title, and interest in and to anything in the shape of meat that may be inside."

"Meat cans," said Melick, "are never so large as that."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said the doctor, "they make up pretty large packages of pemmican for the arctic
expeditions."

"But they never pack up pemmican in copper cylinders," said Melick, who had been using his knife to scrape off the crust from the vessel.

"Copper!" exclaimed Oxenden. "Is it copper?"

"Look for yourselves," said Melick, quietly.

They all looked, and could see, where the knife had cut into the vessel, that it was as he said. It was copper.

"It's foreign work," said Melick. "In England we make tin cans for everything. It may be something that's drifted out from Mogadore or some port in Morocco."

"In that case," said Oxenden, "it may contain the mangled remains of one of the wives of some Moorish pasha."

By this time they had reached the yacht and hurried aboard. All were eager to satisfy their curiosity. Search was made for a cold-chisel, but to no purpose. Then Featherstone produced a knife which was used to open sardine boxes, but after a faithful trial this proved useless. At length Melick, who had gone off in search of something more effective, made his appearance armed with an axe. With this he attacked the copper cylinder, and by means of a few dexterous blows succeeded in cutting it open. Then he looked in.

"What do you see?" asked Featherstone.

"Something," said Melick, "but I can't quite make it out."

"If you can't make it out, then shake it out," said Oxenden.

Upon this Melick took the cylinder, turned it upside down, shook it smartly, and then lifted it and pounded it against the deck. This served to loosen the contents, which seemed tightly packed, but came gradually down until at length they could be seen and drawn forth. Melick drew them forth, and the contents of the mysterious copper cylinder resolved themselves into two packages.

The sight of these packages only served to intensify their curiosity. If it had been some species of food it would at once have revealed itself, but these packages suggested something more important. What could they be? Were there treasures inside--jewels, or golden ornaments from some Moorish seraglio, or strange coin from far Cathay?

One of the packages was very much larger than the other. It was enclosed in wrappers made of some coarse kind of felt, bound tight with strong cords. The other was much smaller, and, was folded in the same material without being bound. This Melick seized and began to open.

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"Wait a minute," said Featherstone. "Let's make a bet on it. Five guineas that it's some sort of jewels!"

"Done," said Oxenden.

Melick opened the package, and it was seen that Featherstone had lost. There were no jewels, but one or two sheets of something that looked like paper. It was not paper, however, but some vegetable product which was used for the same purpose. The surface was smooth, but the color was dingy, and the lines of the vegetable fibres were plainly discernible. These sheets were covered with writing.

"Halloa!" cried Melick. "Why, this is English!"

At this the others crowded around to look on, and Featherstone in his excitement forgot that he had lost his bet. There were three sheets, all covered with writing--one in English, another in French, and a third in German. It was the same message, written in these three different languages. But at that moment they scarcely noticed this. All that they saw was the message itself, with its mysterious meaning.

It was as follows:

"To the finder of this:

Sir,--I am an Englishman, and have been carried by a series of incredible events to a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave. I have written this and committed it to the sea, in the hope that the ocean currents may bear it within the reach of civilized man. Oh, unknown friend! whoever you are. I entreat you to let this message be made known in some way to my father, Henry More, Keswick, Cumberland, England, so that he may learn the fate of his son. The MS. accompanying this contains an account of my adventures, which I should like to have forwarded to him. Do this for the sake of that mercy which you may one day wish to have shown to yourself.

ADAM MORE."

"By Jove!" cried Featherstone, as he read the above, "this is really getting to be something tremendous."

"This other package must be the manuscript," said Oxenden, "and it'll tell all about it."

"Such a manuscript'll be better than meat," said the doctor, sententiously.

Melick said nothing, but, opening his knife, he cut the cords and unfolded the wrapper. He saw a great collection of leaves, just like those of the letter, of some vegetable substance, smooth as paper, and covered with writing.

"It looks like Egyptian papyrus," said the doctor. "That was the common paper of antiquity."

"Never mind the Egyptian papyrus," said Featherstone, in feverish curiosity. "Let's have the contents of the manuscript. You, Melick, read; you're the most energetic of the lot, and when you're tired the rest of us will take
turns."

"Read? Why, it'll take a month to read all this," said Melick.

"All the better," said Featherstone; "this calm will probably last a month, and we shall have nothing to interest us."

Melick made no further objection. He was as excited as the rest, and so he began the reading of the manuscript.

CHAPTER II
ADrift in the Antarctic Ocean

My name is Adam More. I am the son of Henry More, apothecary, Keswick, Cumberland. I was mate of the ship Trevelyon (Bennet, master), which was chartered by the British Government to convey convicts to Van Dieman's Land. This was in 1843. We made our voyage without any casualty, landed our convicts in Hobart Town, and then set forth on our return home. It was the 17th of December when we left. From the first adverse winds prevailed, and in order to make any progress we were obliged to keep well to the south. At length, on the 6th of January, we sighted Desolation Island. We found it, indeed, a desolate spot. In its vicinity we saw a multitude of smaller islands, perhaps a thousand in number, which made navigation difficult, and forced us to hurry away as fast as possible. But the aspect of this dreary spot was of itself enough to repel us. There were no trees, and the multitude of islands seemed like moss-covered rocks; while the temperature, though in the middle of the antarctic summer, was from 38 to 58 degrees Fahr.

In order to get rid of these dangerous islands we stood south and west, and at length found ourselves in south latitude 65 degrees, longitude 60 degrees east. We were fortunate enough not to find any ice, although we were within fifteen hundred miles of the South Pole, and far within that impenetrable icy barrier which, in 1773, had arrested the progress of Captain Cook. Here the wind failed us, and we lay becalmed and drifting. The sea was open all around us, except to the southeast, where there was a low line along the horizon terminating in a lofty promontory; but though it looked like land we took it for ice. All around us whales and grampuses were gambolling and spouting in vast numbers. The weather was remarkably fine and clear.

For two or three days the calm continued, and we drifted along helplessly, until at length we found ourselves within a few miles of the promontory above mentioned. It looked like land, and seemed to be a rocky island rising from the depths of the sea. It was, however, all covered with ice and snow, and from this there extended eastward as far as the eye could reach an interminable line of ice, but toward the southwest the sea seemed open to navigation. The promontory was very singular in shape, rising up to a peak which was at least a thousand feet in height, and forming a striking object, easily discovered and readily identified by any future explorer. We named it, after our ship, Trevelyon Peak, and then felt anxious to lose sight of it forever. But the calm continued, and at length we drifted in close enough to see immense flocks of seals dotting the ice at the foot of the peak.

Upon this I proposed to Agnew, the second mate, that we should go ashore, shoot some seals, and bring them back. This was partly for the excitement of the hunt, and partly for the honor of landing in a place never before trodden by the foot of man. Captain Bennet made some objections, but he was old and cautious, and we were young and venturesome, so we laughed away his scruples and set forth. We did not take any of the crew, owing to the captain's objections. He said that if we chose to throw away our own lives he could not help it, but that he would positively refuse to allow a single man to go with us. We thought this refusal an excess of caution amounting to positive cowardice, but were unable to change his mind. The distance was not great, the adventure was attractive, and so the captain's gig was lowered, and in this Agnew and I rowed ashore. We took with us a double-barrelled rifle apiece, and also a pistol. Agnew took a glass.

We rowed for about three miles, and reached the edge of the ice, which extended far out from the promontory. Here we landed, and secured the boat by means of a small grappling-iron, which we thrust into the ice. We then walked toward the promontory for about a mile, and here we found a multitude of seals. These animals were so fearless that they made not the slightest movement as we came up, but stared at us in an indifferent way. We killed two or three, and then debated whether to go to the promontory or not. Agnew was eager to go, so as to touch the actual rock; but I was satisfied with what we had done, and was now desirous of returning. In the midst of this I felt a flake of snow on my cheek. I started and looked up. To my great surprise I saw that the sky had changed since I had last noticed it. When we left the ship it was clear and blue, but now it was overspread with dark, leaden-colored clouds, and the snow-flakes that had fallen were ominous of evil. A snow-storm here, in the vicinity of the ice, was too serious a thing to be disregarded. But one course now remained, and that was an immediate return to the ship.

Each of us seized a seal and dragged it after us to the boat. We reached it and flung them in. Just at that moment a gun sounded over the water. It was from the ship—the signal of alarm—the summons from the captain for our return. We saw now that she had been drifting since we left her, and had moved southwest several miles. The row back promised to be far harder than the pull ashore, and, what was worse, the wind was coming up, the sea was rising, and the snow was thickening. Neither of us said a word. We saw that our situation was very serious, and that
we had been very foolhardy; but the words were useless now. The only thing to be done was to pull for the ship with all our strength, and that was what we did.

So we pushed off, and rowed as we had never rowed before. Our progress was difficult. The sea grew steadily rougher; the wind increased; the snow thickened; and, worst of all, the day was drawing to a close. We had miscalculated both as to distance and time. Even if it had continued calm we should have had to row back in the dark; but now the sun was setting, and with the darkness we had to encounter the gathering storm and the blinding snow. We rowed in silence. At every stroke our situation grew more serious. The wind was from the south, and therefore favored us to some extent, and also made less of a sea than would have been produced by a wind from any other quarter; but then this south wind brought dangers of its own, which we were soon to feel—new dangers and worse ones. For this south wind drove the ship farther from us, and at the same time broke up the vast fields of ice and impelled the fractured masses northward. But this was a danger which we did not know just then. At that time we were rowing for the ship, and amid the darkness and the blinding snow and the dashing waves we heard from time to time the report of signal-guns fired from the ship to guide us back. These were our only guide, for the darkness and the snow had drawn the ship from our sight, and we had to be guided by our hearing only.

We were rowing for our lives, and we knew it; but every moment our situation grew more desperate. Each new report of the gun seemed to sound farther away. We seemed always to be rowing in the wrong direction. At each report we had to shift the boat's course somewhat, and pull toward the last point from which the gun seemed to sound. With all this the wind was increasing rapidly to a gale, the sea was rising and breaking over the boat, the snow was blinding us with its ever-thickening sleet. The darkness deepened and at length had grown so intense that nothing whatever could be seen—neither sea nor sky, not even the boat itself—yet we dared not stop; we had to row. Our lives depended on our efforts. We had to row, guided by the sound of the ship's gun, which the ever-varying wind incessantly changed, till our minds grew all confused, and we rowed blindly and mechanically.

So we labored for hours at the oars, and the storm continually increased, and the sea continually rose, while the snow fell thicker and the darkness grew intenser. The reports of the gun now grew fainter; what was worse, they were heard at longer intervals, and this showed us that Captain Bennet was losing heart; that he was giving us up; that he despaired of finding us, and was now firing only an occasional gun out of a mournful sense of duty. This thought reduced us to despair. It seemed as if all our efforts had only served to take us farther away from the ship, and deprived us of all motive for rowing any harder than was barely necessary to keep the boat steady. After a time Agnew dropped his oar and began to bail out the boat—a work which was needed; for, in spite of our care, she had shipped many seas, and was one third full of water. He worked away at this while I managed the boat, and then we took turns at bailing. In this way we passed the dreary night.

Morning came at last. The wind was not so violent, but the snow was so thick that we could only see for a little distance around us. The ship was nowhere visible, nor were there any signs of her. The last gun had been fired during the night. All that we could see was the outline of a gaunt iceberg—an ominous spectacle. Not knowing what else to do we rowed on as before, keeping in what seemed our best course, though this was mere conjecture, and we knew all the time that we might be going wrong. There was no compass in the boat, nor could we tell the sun's position through the thick snow. We rowed with the wind, thinking that it was blowing toward the north, and would carry us in that direction. We still hoped to come within sound of the ship's gun, and kept straining our ears incessantly to hear the wished-for report. But no such sound ever came again, and we heard nothing except the plash of the waves and the crash of breaking ice. Thus all that day we rowed along, resting at intervals when exhausted, and then resuming our labors, until at length night came; and again to the snow and ice and waves was added the horror of great darkness. We passed that night in deep misery. We had eaten nothing since we left the ship, but the cold was so great to allow us to take rest, and we were compelled to row so as to keep ourselves from perishing. But fatigue and drowsiness overcame us, and we often sank into sleep even while rowing; and then after a brief slumber we would awake with benumbed limbs to wrestle again with the oars. In this way we passed that night.

Another morning came, and we found to our great joy that the snow had ceased. We looked eagerly around to see if there were any signs of the ship. Nothing could be seen of her. Far away on one side rose a peak, which looked like the place where we had landed. Judging from the wind, which we still supposed to be southerly, the peak lay toward the northeast; in which case we had been carried steadily, in spite of all our efforts, toward the south. About a mile on one side of us the ice began, and extended far away; while on the other side, at the distance of some ten miles, there was another line of ice. We seemed to have been carried in a southwesterly direction along a broad strait that ran into the vast ice-fields. This discovery showed how utterly useless our labors had been; for in spite of all, even with the wind in our favor, we had been drawn steadily in an opposite direction. It was evident that there was some current here, stronger than all our strength, which had brought us to this place.
We now determined to land on the ice, and try to cook a portion of our seals. On approaching it we noticed that there was a current which tended to draw us past the ice in what I supposed to be a southwesterly direction. This confirmed my worst fears. But now the labor of landing and building a fire on the ice served to interest us for a time and divert our thoughts. We brushed away the snow, and then broke up a box which was in the boat, and also the stern seats. This we used very sparingly, reserving the rest for another occasion. Then we cut portions from one of the seals, and laid them in thin strips on the flames. The cooking was but slight, for the meat was merely singed; but we were ravenous, and the contact of the fire was enough to give it an attractive flavor. With this food we were greatly refreshed; and for drink, we had all around us an endless extent of ice and snow. Then, taking our precious fragments of cooked meat, we returned to the boat and put off. We could scarcely tell what to do next, and while debating on this point we fell asleep. We slept far into the night, then awoke benumbed with cold; then took to the oars till we were weary; then fell asleep again, to be again awakened by the cold and again to pull at the oars. So the night passed, and another day came.

The snow still held off, but the sky was overcast with dark, leaden-colored clouds, and looked threatening. Ice was all around us as before; and the open water had diminished now from ten miles to five miles of width. The ice on one side was low, but on the opposite side it arose to the height of one hundred feet. We saw here, as we watched the shore, that the current which had already borne us thus far was now stronger than ever, and was carrying us along at a rate which made all efforts of ours against it utterly useless. And now a debate arose between us as to the direction of this current. Agnew suddenly declared his belief that it was running north, while I was firm in the conviction that it ran south.

"There's no use rowing any more," said Agnew. "If it runs south we can't resist it. It's too strong. But I always like to look on the bright side, and so I believe it runs north. In that case there is no use rowing, for it will carry us along fast enough."

Then I proposed that we should go ashore on the ice. To this Agnew objected, but afterward consented, at my earnest request. So we tried to get ashore, but this time found it impossible; for the ice consisted of a vast sheet of floating lumps, which looked like the ruin of bergs that had been broken up in some storm. After this I had nothing to say, nor was there anything left for us but to drift wherever the current might carry us.

So we drifted for some days, Agnew all the time maintaining that we were going north, while I was sure that we were going south. The sky remained as cloudy as ever, the wind varied incessantly, and there was nothing by which we could conjecture the points of the compass. We lived on our seal, and for drink we chewed ice and snow. One thing was certain--the climate was no colder. Agnew laid great stress on this.

"You see," said he, "we must be going north. If we were going south we should be frozen stiff by this time."

"Yes; but if we were going north," said I, "we ought to find it growing warmer."

"No," said he, "not with all this ice around us. It's the ice that keeps the temperature in this cold state."

Argument could do no good, and so we each remained true to our belief--his leading him to hope, and mine dragging me down to despair. At length we finished the last fragment of the seal that we had cooked, and, finding ourselves near some firm ice, we went ashore and cooked all that was left, using the remainder of our wood for fuel, and all that we dared to remove from the boat. Re-embarking with this, we drifted on as before.

Several more days passed. At last one night I was roused by Agnew. He pointed far away to the distant horizon, where I saw a deep red glow as of fire. We were both filled with wonder at the sight, and were utterly unable to account for it. We knew that it could not be caused by the sun or the moon, for it was midnight, and the cause lay on the earth and not in the skies. It was a deep, lurid glow, extending along the horizon, and seemed to be caused by some vast conflagration.

CHAPTER III
A WORLD OF FIRE AND DESOLATION

At the sight of that deep-red glow various feelings arose within us: in me there was new dejection; in Agnew there was stronger hope. I could not think but that it was our ship that was on fire, and was burning before our eyes. Agnew thought that it was some burning forest, and that it showed our approach to some habitable and inhabited land. For hour after hour we watched, and all the time the current drew us nearer, and the glow grew brighter and more intense. At last we were too weak to watch any longer, and we fell asleep.

On waking our first thoughts were about the fire, and we looked eagerly around. It was day, but the sky was as gloomy as ever, and the fire was there before our eyes, bright and terrible. We could now see it plainly, and discern the cause also. The fire came from two points, at some distance apart--two peaks rising above the horizon, from which there burst forth flames and smoke with incessant explosions. All was now manifest. It was no burning ship, no blazing forest, no land inhabited by man: those blazing peaks were two volcanoes in a state of active eruption, and at that sight I knew the worst.

"I know where we are now," I said, despairingly.
"Where?" asked Agnew.
"That," said I, "is the antarctic continent."
"The antarctic fiddlestick," said he, contemptuously. "It is far more likely to be some volcanic island in the South Sea. There's a tremendous volcano in the Sandwich Islands, and these are something like it."
"I believe," said I, "that these are the very volcanoes that Sir James Ross discovered last year."
"Do you happen to know where he found them?" Agnew asked.
"I do not," I answered.
"Well, I do," said he, "and they're thousands of miles away from this. They are south latitude 77 degrees, east longitude 167 degrees; while we, as I guess, are about south latitude 40 degrees, east longitude 60 degrees."
"At any rate," said I, "we're drifting straight toward them."
"So I see," said Agnew, dryly. "At any rate, the current will take us somewhere. We shall find ourselves carried past these volcanic islands, or through them, and then west to the Cape of Good Hope. Besides, even here we may find land with animals and vegetation; who knows?"
"What! amid all this ice?" I cried. "Are you mad?"
"Mad?" said he; "I should certainly go mad if I hadn't hope."
"Hope!" I repeated; "I have long since given up hope."
"Oh, well," said he, "enjoy your despair, and don't try to deprive me of my consolation. My hope sustains me, and helps me to cheer you up. It would never do, old fellow, for both of us to knock under."

I said nothing more, nor did Agnew. We drifted on, and all our thoughts were taken up with the two volcanoes, toward which we were every moment drawing nearer. As we approached they grew larger and larger, towering up to a tremendous height. I had seen Vesuvius and Stromboli and AEtna and Cotopaxi; but these appeared far larger than any of them, not excepting the last. They rose, like the Peak of Teneriffe, abruptly from the sea, with no intervening hills to dwarf or diminish their proportions. They were ten or twelve miles apart, and the channel of water in which we were drifting flowed between them.

Here the ice and snow ended. We thus came at last to land; but it was a land that seemed more terrible than even the bleak expanse of ice and snow that lay behind, for nothing could be seen except a vast and drear accumulation of lava-blocks of every imaginable shape, without a trace of vegetation--uninhabited, uninhabitable, and unpassable to man. But just where the ice ended and the rocks began there was a long, low reef, which projected for more than a quarter of a mile into the water, affording the only possible landing-place within sight. Here we decided to land, so as to rest and consider what was best to be done.

Here we landed, and walked up to where rugged lava-blocks prevented any further progress. But at this spot our attention was suddenly arrested by a sight of horror. It was a human figure lying prostrate, face downward. It was some time before we could recover ourselves; then we went to the figure, and stooped down to examine it.

The clothes were those of a European and a sailor; the frame was emaciated and dried up, till it looked like a skeleton; the face was blackened and all withered, and the bony hands were clinched tight. It was evidently some sailor who had suffered shipwreck in these frightful solitudes, and had drifted here to starve to death in this appalling wilderness. It was a sight which seemed ominous of our own fate, and Agnew's boasted hope, which had so long upheld him, now sank down into a despair as deep as my own. What room was there now for hope, or how could we expect any other fate than this?

At length I began to search the pockets of the deceased.
"What are you doing?" asked Agnew, in a hoarse voice.
"I'm trying to find out who he is," I said. "Perhaps there may be papers."
As I said this I felt something in the breast-pocket of his jacket, and drew it forth. It was a leather pocket-book, mouldy and rotten like the clothing. On opening it, it fell to pieces. There was nothing in it but a piece of paper, also mouldy and rotten. This I unfolded with great care, and saw writing there, which, though faded, was still legible. It was a letter, and there were still signs of long and frequent perusals, and marks, too, which looked as though made by tears--tears, perhaps of the writer, perhaps of the reader: who can tell? I have preserved this letter ever since, and I now fasten it here upon this sheet of my manuscript.

THE LETTER.
"Bristol April 20. 1820.
"my darling tom

"I writ you these few lines in hast i don like youar gon a walen an in the south sea dont go darlin tom or mebbe ill never se you agin for ave bad dremns of you darlin tom an im afraid so don go my darlin tom but come back an take anoth ship for America baby i as wel as ever but mises is pa an as got a new tooth an i think yo otn go a walen
o darlin tom * * * sea as the wages was i in New York an better go thar an id like to go ther for good for they gives
good wages in America. O come back my Darlin tom and take me to America an the baby an weel all live an love an
di together

"Your loving wife Polley Reed."

I began to read this, but there came a lump in my throat, and I had to stop. Agnew leaned on my shoulder, and
we both read it in silence. He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes and drew a long breath. Then he walked
away for a little distance, and I put the letter carefully away in my own pocket-book. After a little while Agnew
came back.

"More," said he, "do you remember any of the burial-service?"

I understood his meaning at once.

"Yes," I said, "some of it--a good deal of it, I think."

"That's good," said he. "Let's put the poor fellow under ground."

"It would be hard to do that," I said; "we'll have to bury him in the snow."

At this Agnew went off for a little distance and clambered over the rocks. He was not gone long. When he
returned he said, "I've found some crumbled pumice-stone; we can scoop a grave for him there."

We then raised the body and carried it to the place which Agnew had found. So emaciated was the poor dead
sailor that his remains were no heavier than a small boy. On reaching the spot, we found the crumbled pumice-stone.
We placed the body in a crevice among the lava rocks, and then I said what I could remember of the burial-service.
After this we carried in our hands the crumbled pumice-stone until we had covered the body, and thus gave the poor
fellow a Christian burial.

We then returned to the shore.

"More, old fellow," said Agnew, "I feel the better for this; the service has done me good."

"And me too," said I. "It has reminded me of what I had forgotten. This world is only a part of life. We may
lose it and yet live on. There is another world; and if we can only keep that in our minds we sha'n't be so ready to
sink into despair—that is, I sha'n't. Despair is my weakness; you are more hopeful."

"Yes," said Agnew, solemnly; "but my hope thus far has referred only to the safety of my skin. After this I shall
try to think of my soul, and cultivate, not the hope of escape, but the hope full of immortality. Yes, More, after all
we shall live, if not in England, then, let us hope, in heaven."

There was a long silence after this--that kind of silence which one may preserve who is at the point of death.

"I wonder how he got here?" said Agnew, at last. "The letter mentions a whaler. No doubt the ship has been
driven too far south; it has foundered; he has escaped in a boat, either alone or with others; he has been carried along
this channel, and has landed here, afraid to go any farther."

"But his boat, what has become of that?"

"His boat! That must have gone long ago. The letter was written in 1820. At any rate, let's look around."

We did so. After some search we found fragments of a rotted rope attached to a piece of rock.

"That," said Agnew, "must have been fastened to the boat; and as for the boat herself, she has long ago been
swept away from this."

"What shall we do now?" I said, after a long silence.

"There's only one thing," said Agnew. "We must go on."

"Go on?" I asked, in wonder.

"Certainly," said he, confidently. "Will you stay here? No. Will you go back? You can't. We must, therefore, go
on. That is our only hope."

"Hope!" I cried. "Do you still talk of hope?"

"Hope?" said Agnew; "of course. Why not? There are no limits to hope, are there? One can hope anything
anywhere. It is better to die while struggling like a man, full of hope and energy than to perish in inaction and
despair. It is better to die in the storm and furious waters than to waste away in this awful place. So come along.
Let's drift as before. Let's see where this channel will take us. It will certainly take us somewhere. Such a stream as
this must have some outlet."

"This stream," said I, "will take us to death, and death only. The current grows swifter every hour. I've heard
some old yarn of a vast opening at each of the poles, or one of them, into which the waters of the ocean pour. They
fall into one, and some say they go through and come out at the other."

Agnew laughed.

"That," said he, "is a madman's dream. In the first place, I don't believe that we are approaching the south, but
the north. The warmth of the climate here shows that. Yes, we are drawing north. We shall soon emerge into warm
waters and bright skies. So come along, and let us lose no more time."

I made no further objection. There was nothing else to be done, and at the very worst we could not be in greater
danger while drifting on than in remaining behind. Soon, therefore, we were again in the boat, and the current swept us on as before.

The channel now was about four miles wide. On either side arose the lofty volcanoes vomiting forth flames and smoke with furious explosions; vast stones were hurled up into the air from the craters; streams of molten lava rolled down, and at intervals there fell great showers of ashes. The shores on either side were precipitous and rugged beyond all description, looking like fiery lava streams which had been arrested by the flood, and cooled into gloomy, overhanging cliffs. The lava rock was of a deep, dull slate-color, which at a distance looked black; and the blackness which thus succeeded to the whiteness of the snow behind us seemed like the funeral pall of nature. Through scenes like these we drifted on, and the volcanoes on either side of the channel towered on high with their fiery floods of lava, their incessant explosions, their fierce outbursts of flames, and overhead there rolled a dense black canopy of smoke—altogether forming a terrific approach to that unknown and awful pathway upon which we were going. So we passed this dread portal, and then there lay before us—what? Was it a land of life or a land of death? Who could say?

It was evening when we passed through. Night came on, and the darkness was illuminated by the fiery glow of the volcanic flames. Worn out with fatigue, we fell asleep. So the night passed, and the current bore us on until, at length, the morning came. We awoke, and now, for the first time in many days, we saw the face of the sun. The clouds had at last broken, the sky was clear, and behind us the sun was shining. That sight told us all. It showed us where we were going.

I pointed to the sun.
"Look there," said I. "There is the sun in the northern sky—behind us. We have been drifting steadily toward the south."

At this Agnew was silent, and sat looking back for a long time. There we could still see the glow of the volcanic fires, though they were now many miles away; while the sun, but lately risen, was lying on a course closer to the horizon than we had ever seen it before.

"We are going south," said I—"to the South Pole. This swift current can have but one ending—there may be an opening at the South Pole, or a whirlpool like the Maelstrom."

Agnew looked around with a smile.
"All these notions," said he, "are dreams, or theories, or guesses. There is no evidence to prove them. Why trouble yourself about a guess? You and I can guess, and with better reason; for we have now, it seems, come farther south than any human being who has ever lived. Do not imagine that the surface of the earth is different at the poles from what it is anywhere else. If we get to the South Pole we shall see there what we have always seen—the open view of land or water, and the boundary of the horizon. As for this current, it seems to me like the Gulf Stream, and it evidently does an important work in the movement of the ocean waters. It pours on through vast fields of ice on its way to other oceans, where it will probably become united with new currents. Theories about openings at the poles, or whirlpools, must be given up. Since the Maelstrom has been found to be a fiction, no one need believe in any other whirlpool. For my own part, I now believe that this current will bear us on, due south, over the pole, and then still onward, until at last we shall find ourselves in the South Pacific Ocean. So cheer up—don't be downhearted; there's still hope. We have left the ice and snow behind, and already the air is warmer. Cheer up; we may find our luck turn at any moment."

To this I had no reply to make. Agnew's confidence seemed to me to be assumed, and certainly did not alleviate my own deep gloom, nor was the scene around calculated to rouse me in the slightest degree out of my despair. The channel had now lessened to a width of not more than two miles; the shores on either side were precipitous cliffs, broken by occasional declivities, but all of solid rock, so dark as to be almost black, and evidently of volcanic origin. At times there arose rugged eminences, scarred and riven, indescribably dismal and appalling. There was not only an utter absence of life here in these abhorrent regions, but an actual impossibility of life which was enough to make the stoutest heart quail. The rocks looked like iron. It seemed a land of iron penetrated by this ocean stream which had made for itself a channel, and now bore us onward to a destination which was beyond all conjecture.

Through such scenes we drifted all that day. Night came, and in the skies overhead there arose a brilliant display of the aurora australis, while toward the north the volcanic fires glowed with intense lustre. That night we slept. On awakening we noticed a change in the scene. The shores, though still black and forbidding, were no longer precipitous, but sloped down gradually to the water; the climate was sensibly milder, and far away before us there arose a line of giant mountains, whose summits were covered with ice and snow that gleamed white and purple in the rays of the sun.

Suddenly Agnew gave a cry, and pointed to the opposite shore.
"Look!" he cried—"do you see? They are men!"

I looked, and there I saw plainly some moving figures that were, beyond a doubt, human beings.
CHAPTER IV
THE SIGHT OF HUMAN BEINGS

The sight of human beings, thus unexpectedly found, filled us with strange feelings—feelings which I cannot
explain. The country was still iron-bound and dark and forbidding, and the stream ran on in a strong current, deep,
black as ink, and resistless as fate; the sky behind was lighted up by the volcanic glare which still shone from afar;
and in front the view was bounded by the icy heights of a mountain chain. Here was, indeed, a strange country for a
human habitation; and strange, indeed, were the human beings whom we saw.

"Shall we land?" said Agnew.

"Oh no," said I. "Don't be hasty. The elements are sometimes kinder than men, and I feel safer here, even in this
river of death, than ashore with such creatures as those."

Agnew made no reply. We watched the figures on the shore. We saw them coming down, staring and
gesticulating. We drew on nearer to them till we were able to see them better. A nearer view did not improve them.
They were human beings, certainly, but of such an appalling aspect that they could only be likened to animated
mummies. They were small, thin, shrivelled, black, with long matted hair and hideous faces. They all had long
spears, and wore about the waist short skirts that seemed to be made of the skin of some sea-fowl.

We could not imagine how these creatures lived, or where. There were no signs of vegetation of any kind—not a
tree or a shrub. There were no animals; but there were great flocks of birds, some of which seemed different from
anything that we had ever seen before. The long spears which the natives carried might possibly be used for catching
these, or for fishing purposes. This thought made them seem less formidable, since they would thus be instruments
of food rather than weapons of war. Meanwhile we drifted on as before, and the natives watched us, running along
the shore abreast of us, so as to keep up with the boat. There seemed over a hundred of them. We could see no signs
of any habitations—no huts, however humble; but we concluded that their abodes were farther inland. As for the
natives themselves, the longer we looked at them the more abhorrent they grew. Even the wretched aborigines of
Van Dieman's Land, who have been classed lowest in the scale of humanity, were pleasing and congenial when
compared with these, and the land looked worse than Tierra del Fuego. It looked like a land of iron, and its
inhabitants like fiends.

Agnew again proposed to land, but I refused.

"No," I said; "I'd rather starve for a week, and live on hope. Let us drift on. If we go on we may have hope if we
choose, but if we land here we shall lose even that. Can we hope for anything from such things as these? Even if
they prove friendly, can we live among them? To stay here is worse than death; our only hope is to go on."

Agnew made no reply, and we drifted on for two hours, still followed by the natives. They made no hostile
demonstrations. They merely watched us, apparently from motives of curiosity. All this time we were drawing
steadily nearer to the line of lofty mountains, which with their icy crests rose before us like an inaccessible and
impassable barrier, apparently closing up all farther progress; nor was there any indication of any pass or any
opening, however narrow, through which the great stream might run. Nothing was there but one unbroken wall of
iron cliffs and icy summits. At last we saw that the sloping shores grew steeper, until, about a mile or two before us,
they changed to towering cliffs that rose up on each side for about a thousand feet above the water; here the stream
ran, and became lost to view as completely as though swallowed up by the earth.

"We can go no farther," said Agnew. "See—this stream seems to make a plunge there into the mountains. There
must be some deep canyon there with cataracts. To go on is certain death. We must stop here, if only to deliberate.
Say, shall we risk it among these natives? After all, there is not, perhaps, any danger among them. They are little
creatures and seem harmless. They are certainly not very good-looking; but then, you know, appearances often
deceive, and the devil's not so black as he's painted. What do you say?"

"I suppose we can do nothing else," said I.

In fact, I could see that we had reached a crisis in our fate. To go on seemed certain death. To stop was our only
alternative; and as we were armed we should not be altogether at the mercy of these creatures. Having made this
decision we acted upon it at once, for in such a current there was no time for delay; and so, seizing the oars, we soon
brought the boat ashore.

As we approached, the crowd of natives stood awaiting us, and looked more repulsive than ever. We could see
the emaciation of their bony frames; their toes and fingers were like birds' claws; their eyes were small and dull and
weak, and sunken in cavernous hollows, from which they looked at us like corpses—a horrible sight. They stood
quietly, however, and without any hostile demonstration, holding their spears carelessly resting upon the ground.

"I don't like the looks of them," said I. "I think I had better fire a gun."

"Why?" cried Agnew. "For Heaven's sake, man, don't hurt any of them!"

"Oh no," said I; "I only mean to inspire a little wholesome respect."

Saying this I fired in the air. The report rang out with long echoes, and as the smoke swept away it showed us
all the natives on the ground. They had seated themselves with their hands crossed on their laps, and there they sat looking at us as before, but with no manifestation of fear or even surprise. I had expected to see them run, but there was nothing of the kind. This puzzled us. Still, there was no time now for any further hesitation. The current was sweeping us toward the chasm between the cliffs, and we had to land without delay. This we did, and as I had another barrel still loaded and a pistol, I felt that with these arms and those of Agnew we should be able to defend ourselves. It was in this state of mind that we landed, and secured the boat by means of the grappling-iron.

The natives now all crowded around us, making many strange gestures, which we did not understand. Some of them bowed low, others prostrated themselves; on the whole these seemed like marks of respect, and it occurred to me that they regarded us as superior beings of some sort. It was evident that there was nothing like hostility in their minds. At the same time, the closer survey which I now made of them filled me with renewed horror; their meagre frames, small, watery, lack-lustre eyes, hollow, cavernous sockets, sunken cheeks, protruding teeth, claw-like fingers, and withered skins, all made them look more than ever like animated mummies, and I shrank from them involuntarily, as one shrinks from contact with a corpse.

Agnew, however, was very different, and it was evident that he felt no repugnance whatever. He bowed and smiled at them, and shook hands with half a dozen of them in succession. The hand-shaking was a new thing to them, but they accepted it in a proper spirit, and renewed their bows and prostrations. After this they all offered us their lances. This certainly seemed like an act of peace and good-will. I shook my head and declined to touch them; but Agnew accepted one of them, and offered his rifle in return. The one to whom he offered it refused to take it. He seemed immensely gratified because Agnew had taken his lance, and the others seemed disappointed at his refusal to take theirs. But I felt my heart quake as I saw him offer his rifle, and still more when he offered it to one or two others, and only regained my composure as I perceived that his offer was refused by all.

They now made motions to us to follow, and we all set forth together.

"My dear More," said Agnew, cheerily, "they're not a bad lot. They mean well. They can't help their looks. You're too suspicious and reserved. Let's make friends with them, and get them to help us. Do as I do."

I tried to, but found it impossible, for my repugnance was immovable. It was like the horror which one feels toward rats, cockroaches, earwigs, or serpents. It was something that defied reason. These creatures seemed like human vermin.

We marched inland for about half a mile, crossed a ridge, and came to a valley, or rather a kind of hollow, at the other side of which we found a cave with a smouldering fire in front. The fire was made of coal, which must exist here somewhere. It was highly bituminous, and burned with a great blaze.

The day was now drawing to a close; far away I could see the lurid glow of the volcanoes, which grew brighter as the day declined: above, the skies twinkled with innumerable stars, and the air was filled with the moan of rushing waters.

We entered the cave. As we did so the natives heaped coal upon the fire, and the flames arose, lighting up the interior. We found here a number of women and children, who looked at us without either fear or curiosity. The children looked like little dwarfs; the women were hags, hideous beyond description. One old woman in particular, who seemed to be in authority, was actually terrible in her awful and repulsive ugliness. A nightmare dream never furnished forth a more frightful object. This nightmare hag prostrated herself before each of us with such an air of self-immolation that she looked as though she wished us to kill her at once. The rough cave, the red light of the fire, all made the scene more awful; and a wild thought came to me that we had actually reached, while yet living, the infernal world, and that this was the abode of devils. Yet their actions, it must be confessed, were far from devilish. Everyone seemed eager to serve us. Some spread out couches formed of the skins of birds for us to sit on; others attended to the fire; others offered us gifts of large and beautiful feathers, together with numerous trinkets of rare and curious workmanship. This kind attention on their part was a great puzzle to me, and I could not help suspecting that beneath all this there must be some sinister design. Resolving to be prepared for the worst, I quietly reloaded the empty barrel of my rifle and watched with the utmost vigilance. As for Agnew, he took it all in the most unsuspicious manner. He made signs to them, shook hands with them, accepted their gifts, and even tried to do the agreeable to the formidable hags and the child-fiends around him. He soon attracted the chief attention, and while all looked admiringly upon him, I was left to languish in comparative neglect.

At length a savory odor came through the cave, and a repast was spread before us. It consisted of some large fowl that looked like a goose, but was twice as large as the largest turkey that I had ever seen. The taste was like that of a wild-goose, but rather fishy. Still to us it seemed delicious, for our prolonged diet of raw seal had made us ready to welcome any other food whatever; and this fowl, whatever it was, would not have been unwelcome to any hungry man. It was evident that these people lived on the flesh of birds of various sorts. All around us we saw the skins of birds dried with the feathers on, and used for clothing, for mats, and for ornaments.

The repast being finished, we both felt greatly strengthened and refreshed. Agnew continued to cultivate his
new acquaintances, and seeing me holding back, he said,

"More, old fellow, these good people give me to understand that there is another place better than this, and want me to go with them. Will you go?"

At this a great fear seized me.

"Don't go!" I cried--"don't go! We are close by the boat here, and if anything happens we can easily get to it."

Agnew laughed in my face.

"Why, you don't mean to tell me," said he, "that you are still suspicious, and after that dinner? Why, man, if they wanted to harm us, would they feast us in this style? Nonsense, man! Drop your suspicions and come along."

I shook my head obstinately.

"Well," said he, "if I thought there was anything in your suspicions I would stay by you; but I'm confident they mean nothing but kindness, so I'm going off to see the place."

"You'll be back again?" said I.

"Oh yes," said he, "of course I'll come back, and sleep here."

With these words he left, and nearly all the people accompanied him. I was left behind with the women and children and about a dozen men. These men busied themselves with some work over bird-skins; the women were occupied with some other work over feathers. No one took any notice of me. There did not seem to be any restraint upon me, nor was I watched in any way. Once the nightmare hag came and offered me a small roasted fowl, about the size of a woodcock. I declined it, but at the same time this delicate attention certainly surprised me. I was now beginning to struggle with some success against my feelings of abhorrence, when suddenly I caught sight of something which chased away every other thought, and made my blood turn cold in my veins. It was something outside. At the mouth of the cave--by the fire which was still blazing bright, and lighting up the scene--I saw four men who had just come to the cave: they were carrying something which I at first supposed to be a sick or wounded companion. On reaching the fire they put it down, and I saw, with a thrill of dismay, that their burden was neither sick nor wounded, but dead, for the corpse lay rigid as they had placed it. Then I saw the nightmare hag approach it with a knife. An awful thought came to me--the crowning horror! The thought soon proved to be but too well founded. The nightmare hag began to cut, and in an instant had detached the arm of the corpse, which she thrust at their awful work. But at this point I was observed and followed. A number of men and women came after me, jabbering their uncouth language and gesticulating. I warned them off, angrily. They persisted, and though none of them were armed, yet I saw that they were unwilling to have me leave the cave, and I supposed that they would try to prevent me by force.

The absence of Agnew made my position a difficult one. Had it not been for this I would have burst through them and fled to the boat; but as long as he was away I felt bound to wait; and though I longed to fly, I could not for his sake. The boat seemed to be a haven of rest. I longed to be in her once more, and drift away, even if it should be to my death. Nature was here less terrible than man; and it seemed better to drown in the waters, to perish amid rocks and whirlpools, than to linger here amid such horrors as these. These people were not like human beings. The vilest and lowest savages that I had ever seen were not so odious as these. A herd of monkeys would be far more congenial, a flock of wolves less abhorrent. They had the caricature of the human form; they were the lowest of humanity; their speech was a mockery of language; their faces devilish, their kindness a cunning pretence; and most hideous of all was the nightmare hag that prepared the cannibal repast.

I could not begin hostilities, for I had to wait for Agnew; so I stood and looked, and then walked away for a little distance. They followed me closely, with eager words and gesticulations, though as yet no one touched me or threatened me. Their tone seemed rather one of persuasion. After a few paces I stood still, and with all of them around me. The horrible repast showed plainly all that was in store for us. They received us kindly and fed us well only to prevent me by force. The boat seemed to be a haven of rest. I longed to be in her once more, and drift away, even if it should be to my death. Nature was here less terrible than man; and it seemed better to drown in the waters, to perish amid rocks and whirlpools, than to linger here amid such horrors as these. These people were not like human beings. The vilest and lowest savages that I had ever seen were not so odious as these. A herd of monkeys would be far more congenial, a flock of wolves less abhorrent. They had the caricature of the human form; they were the lowest of humanity; their speech was a mockery of language; their faces devilish, their kindness a cunning pretence; and most hideous of all was the nightmare hag that prepared the cannibal repast.

While standing there looking, listening, waiting for Agnew, I noticed many things. Far away the volcanoes blazed, and the northern sky was red with a lurid light. There, too, higher up, the moon was shining overhead, the sky was gleaming with stars; and all over the heavens there shone the lustre of the aurora australis, brighter than any
I had ever seen--surpassing the moon and illuminating all. It lighted up the haggard faces of the devils around me, and it again seemed to me as though I had died and gone to the land of woe--an iron land, a land of despair, with lurid fires all aglow and faces of fear.

Suddenly, there burst upon my ears the report of a gun, which sounded like a thunder-peal, and echoed in long reverberations. At once I understood it. My fears had proved true. These savages had enticed Agnew away to destroy him. In an instant I burst through the crowd around me, and ran wildly in the direction of that sound, calling his name, as I ran, at the top of my voice.

I heard a loud cry; then another report. I hurried on, shouting his name in a kind of frenzy. The strange courage of these savages had already impressed me deeply. They did not fear our guns. They were all attacking him, and he was alone, fighting for his life.

Then there was another report; it was his pistol. I still ran on, and still shouted to him. At last I received an answer. He had perhaps heard me, and was answering, or, at any rate, he was warning me. "More," he cried, "fly, fly, fly to the boat! Save yourself!"

"Where are you?" I cried, as I still rushed on.

"Fly, More, fly! Save yourself! You can't save me. I'm lost. Fly for your life!"

Judging from his cries, he did not seem far away. I hurried on. I could see nothing of him. All the time the savages followed me. None were armed; but it seemed to me that they were preparing to fling themselves upon me and overpower me with their numbers. They would capture me alive, I thought, bind me, and carry me back, reserving me for a future time!

I turned and waved them back. They took no notice of my gesture. Then I ran on once more. They followed. They could not run so fast as I did, and so I gained on them rapidly, still shouting to Agnew. But there was no response. I ran backward and forward, crossing and recrossing, doubling and turning, pursued all the time by the savages. At last, in rage and despair, I fired upon them, and one of them fell. But, to my dismay, the others did not seem to care one whit; they did not stop for one moment, but pursued as before.

My situation was now plain in all its truth. They had enticed Agnew away; they had attacked him. He had fought, and had been overpowered. He had tried to give me warning. His last words had been for me to fly--to fly: yes, for he well knew that it was better far for me to go to death through the raging torrent than to meet the fate which had fallen upon himself. For him there was now no more hope. If he were still alive he would call to me; but his voice had been silenced for some time. All was over, and that noble heart that had withstood so bravely and cheerily the rigors of the storm, and the horrors of our desperate voyage, had been stilled in death by the vilest of miscreants.

I paused for a moment. Even though Agnew was dead, I could not bear to leave him, but felt as though I ought to share his fate. The savages came nearer. At their approach I hesitated no longer. That fate was too terrible: I must fly.

But before I fled I turned in fury to wreak vengeance upon them for their crimes. Full of rage and despair, I discharged my remaining rifle-barrel into the midst of the crowd. Then I fled toward the boat. On the way I had a frightful thought that she might have been sent adrift; but, on approaching the place, I found her there just as I had left her. The savages, with their usual fearlessness, still pursued. For a moment I stood on the shore, with the grapple in my hand and the boat close by, and as they came near I discharged my pistol into the midst of them. Then I sprang into the boat; the swift current bore me away, and in a few minutes the crowd of pursuing demons disappeared from view.

CHAPTER V

THE TORRENT SWEEPING UNDER THE MOUNTAINS

The boat drifted on. The light given by the aurora and the low moon seemed to grow fainter; and as I looked behind I saw that the distant glow from the volcanic fires had become more brilliant in the increasing darkness. The sides of the channel grew steeper, until at last they became rocky precipices, rising to an unknown height. The channel itself grew narrower, till from a width of two miles it had contracted to a tenth of those dimensions; but with this lessening width the waters seemed to rush far more swiftly. Here I drifted helplessly, and saw the gloomy, rocky cliffs sweep past me as I was hurled onward on the breast of the tremendous flood. I was in despair. The fate of Agnew had prepared me for my own, and I was only thankful that my fate, since it was inevitable, would be less appalling. Death seemed certain, and my chief thought now was as to the moment when it would come. I was prepared. I felt that I could meet it calmly, sternly, even thankfully; far better was a death here amid the roar of waters than at the hands of those abhorrent beings by whose treachery my friend had fallen.

As I went on, the precipices rose higher and seemed to overhang, the channel grew narrower, the light grew fainter, until at last all around me grew dark. I was floating at the bottom of a vast chasm, where the sides seemed to rise precipitously for thousands of feet, where neither watery flood nor rocky wall was visible, and where, far above,
I could see the line of sky between the summits of the cliffs, and watch the glowing stars. And as I watched them there came to me the thought that this was my last sight on earth, and I could only hope that the life which was so swiftly approaching its end might live again somewhere among those glittering orbs. So I thought; and with these thoughts I drifted on, I cannot tell how long, until at length there appeared a vast black mass, where the open sky above me terminated, and where the lustre of the stars and the light of the heavens were all swallowed up in utter darkness.

This, then, I thought, is the end. Here, amid this darkness, I must make the awful plunge and find my death I fell upon my knees in the bottom of the boat and prayed. As I knelt there the boat drew nearer, the black mass grew blacker. The current swept me on. There were no breakers; there was no phosphorescent sparkle of seething waters, and no whiteness of foam. I thought that I was on the brink of some tremendous cataract a thousand times deeper than Niagara; some fall where the waters plunged into the depths of the earth; and where, gathering for the terrific descent, all other movements—all dashings and writhings and twistings—were obliterated and lost in the one overwhelming onward rush. Suddenly all grew dark—dark beyond all expression; the sky above was in a moment snatched from view; I had been flung into some tremendous cavern; and there, on my knees, with terror in my heart, I waited for death.

The moments passed, and death delayed to come. The awful plunge was still put off; and though I remained on my knees and waited long, still the end came not. The waters seemed still, the boat motionless. It was borne upon the surface of a vast stream as smooth as glass; but who could tell how deep that stream was, or how wide? At length I rose from my knees and sank down upon the seat of the boat, and tried to peer through the gloom. In vain. Nothing was visible. It was the very blackness of darkness. I listened, but heard nothing save a deep, dull, droning sound, which seemed to fill all the air and make it all tremulous with its vibrations. I tried to collect my thoughts. I recalled that old theory which had been in my mind before this, and which I had mentioned to Agnew. This was the notion that at each pole there is a vast opening; that into one of them all the waters of the ocean pour themselves, and, after passing through the earth, come out at the other pole, to pass about its surface in innumerable streams. It was a wild fancy, which I had laughed at under other circumstances, but which now occurred to me once more, when I was overwhelmed with despair, and my mind was weakened by the horrors which I had experienced; and I had a vague fear that I had been drawn into the very channel through which the ocean waters flowed in their course to that terrific, that unparalleled abyss. Still, there was as yet no sign whatever of anything like a descent, for the boat was on even keel, and perfectly level as before, and it was impossible for me to tell whether I was moving swiftly or slowly, or standing perfectly still; for in that darkness there were no visible objects by which I could find out the rate of my progress; and as those who go up in balloons are utterly insensible of motion, so was I on those calm but swift waters.

At length there came into view something which arrested my attention and engrossed all my thoughts. It was a faint glow that at first caught my gaze; and, on turning to see it better, I saw a round red spot glowing like fire. I had not seen this before. It looked like the moon when it rises from behind clouds, and glows red and lurid from the horizon; and so this glowed, but not with the steady light of the moon, for the light was fitful, and sometimes flashed into a baleful brightness, which soon subsided into a dimmer lustre. New alarm arose within me, for this new sight suggested something more terrible than anything that I had thus far thought of. This, then, I thought, was to be the end of my voyage; this was my goal—a pit of fire, into which I should be hurled! Would it be well, I thought, to wait for such a fate, and experience such a death-agony? Would it not be better for me to take my own life before I should know the worst? I took my pistol and loaded it, so as to be prepared, but hesitated to use it until my fate was decided. I hesitated long, but finally, as the hideous light grew fainter, I decided to use it. I waited for death.
taken hold of me and could not be shaken off. I knew some scientific men held the opinion that the earth's interior is a mass of molten rock and pent-up fire, and that the earth itself had once been a burning orb, which had cooled down at the surface; yet, after all, this was only a theory, and there were other theories which were totally different. As a boy I had read wild works of fiction about lands in the interior of the earth, with a sun at the centre, which gave them the light of a perpetual day. These, I knew, were only the creations of fiction; yet, after all, it seemed possible that the earth might contain vast hollow spaces in its interior--realms of eternal darkness, caverns in comparison with which the hugest caves on the surface were but the tiniest cells. I was now being borne on to these. In that case there might be no sudden plunge, after all. The stream might run on for many thousand miles through this terrific cavern gloom, in accordance with natural laws; and I might thus live, and drift on in this darkness, until I should die a lingering death of horror and despair.

There was no possible way of forming any estimate as to speed. All was dark, and even the glow behind was fading away; nor could I make any conjecture whatever as to the size of the channel. At the opening it had been contracted and narrow; but here it might have expanded itself to miles, and its vaulted top might reach almost to the summit of the lofty mountains. While sight thus failed me, sound was equally unavailing, for it was always the same--a sustained and intermittent roar, a low, droning sound, deep and terrible, with no variations of dashing breakers or rushing rapids or falling cataracts. Vague thoughts of final escape came and went; but in such a situation hope could not be sustained. The thick darkness oppressed the soul; and at length even the glow of the distant volcanoes, which had been gradually diminishing, grew dimmer and fainter, and finally faded out altogether. That seemed to me to be my last sight of earthly things. After this nothing was left. There was no longer for me such a thing as sight; there was nothing but darkness--perpetual and eternal night. I was buried in a cavern of rushing waters, to which there would be no end, where I should be borne onward helplessly by the resistless tide to a mysterious and an appalling doom.

The darkness grew so intolerable that I longed for something to dispel it, if only for a moment. I struck a match. The air was still, and the flame flashed out, lighting up the boat and showing the black water around me. This made me eager to see more. I loaded both barrels of the rifle, keeping my pistol for another purpose, and then fired one of them. There was a tremendous report, that rang in my ears like a hundred thunder-volleys, and rolled and reverberated far along, and died away in endless echoes. The flash lighted up the scene for an instant, and for an instant only; like the sudden lightning, it revealed all around. I saw a wide expanse of water, black as ink--a Stygian pool; but no rocks were visible, and it seemed as though I had been carried into a subterranean sea.

I loaded the empty barrel and waited. The flash of light had revealed nothing, yet it had distracted my thoughts, and the work of reloading was an additional distraction. Anything was better than inaction. I did not wish to waste my ammunition, yet I thought that an occasional shot might serve some good purpose, if it was only to afford me some relief from despair.

And now, as I sat with the rifle in my hands, I was aware of a sound--new, exciting, different altogether from the murmur of innumerable waters that filled my ears, and in sharp contrast with the droning echoes of the rushing flood. It was a sound that spoke of life. I heard quick, heavy pantings, as of some great living thing; and with this there came the noise of regular movements in the water, and the foaming and gurgling of waves. It was as though some living, breathing creature were here, not far away, moving through these midnight waters; and with this discovery there came a new fear--the fear of pursuit. I thought that some sea-monster had scented me in my boat, and had started to attack me. This new fear aroused me to action. It was a danger quite unlike any other which I had ever known; yet the fear which it inspired was a feeling that roused me to action, and prompted me, even though the coming danger might be as sure as death, to rise against it and resist to the last. So I stood up with my rifle and listened, with all my soul in my sense of hearing. The sounds arose more plainly. They had come nearer. They were immediately in front. I raised my rifle and took aim. Then in quick succession two reports thundered out with tremendous uproar and interminable echoes, but the long reverberations were unheeded in the blaze of sudden light and the vision that was revealed. For there full before me I saw, though but for an instant, a tremendous sight. It was a vast monster, moving in the waters against the stream and toward the boat. Its head was raised high, its eyes were inflamed with a baleful light, its jaws, opened wide, bristled with sharp teeth, and it had a long neck joined to a body of enormous bulk, with a tail that lashed all the water into foam. It was but for an instant that I saw it, and then with a sudden plunge the monster dived, while at the same moment all was as dark as before.

Full of terror and excitement, I loaded my rifle again and waited, listening for a renewal of the noise. I felt sure that the monster, balked of his prey, would return with redoubled fury, and that I should have to renew the conflict. I felt that the dangers of the subterranean passage and of the rushing waters had passed away, and that a new peril had arisen from the assault of this monster of the deep. Nor was it this one alone that was to be dreaded. Where one was, others were sure to be; and if this one should pass me by it would only leave me to be assailed by monsters of the same kind, and these would probably increase in number as I advanced farther into this realm of darkness. And yet,
in spite of these grisly thoughts, I felt less of horror than before, for the fear which I had was now associated with action; and as I stood waiting for the onset and listening for the approach of the enemy, the excitement that ensued was a positive relief from the dull despair into which I had sunk but a moment before.

Yet, though I waited for a new attack, I waited in vain. The monster did not come back. Either the flash and the noise had terrified him, or the bullets had hit him, or else in his vastness he had been indifferent to so feeble a creature as myself; but whatever may have been the cause, he did not emerge again out of the darkness and silence into which he had sunk. For a long time I stood waiting; then I sat down, still watchful, still listening, but without any result, until at length I began to think that there was no chance of any new attack. Indeed, it seemed now as though there had been no attack at all, but that the monster had been swimming at random without any thought of me, in which case my rifle-flashes had terrified him more than his fearful form had terrified me. On the whole this incident had greatly benefited me. It had roused me from my despair. I grew reckless, and felt a disposition to acquiesce in whatever fate might have in store for me.

And now, worn out with fatigue and exhausted from long watchfulness and anxiety, I sank down in the bottom of the boat and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW WORLD

How long I slept I do not know. My sleep was profound, yet disturbed by troubled dreams, in which I lived over again all the eventful scenes of the past; and these were all intermingled in the wildest confusion. The cannibals beckoned to us from the peak, and we landed between the two volcanoes. There the body of the dead sailor received us, and afterward chased us to the boat. Then came snow and volcanic eruptions, and we drifted amid icebergs and molten lava until we entered an iron portal and plunged into darkness. Here were vast swimming monsters and burning orbs of fire and thunderous cataracts falling from inconceivable heights, and the sweep of immeasurable tides and the circling of infinite whirlpools; while in my ears there rang the never-ending roar of remorseless waters that came after us, with all their waves and billows rolling upon us. It was a dream in which all the material terrors of the past were renewed; but these were all as nothing when compared with a certain deep underlying feeling that possessed my soul—a sense of loss irretrievable, an expectation of impending doom, a drear and immitigable despair.

In the midst of this I awoke. It was with a sudden start, and I looked all around in speechless bewilderment. The first thing of which I was conscious was a great blaze of light—light so lately lost, and supposed to be lost forever, but now filling all the universe—bright, brilliant, glowing bringing hope and joy and gladness, with all the splendor but now filling all the universe—bright, brilliant, glowing bringing hope and joy and gladness, with all the splendor of deep blue skies and the multitudinous laughter of ocean waves that danced and sparkled in the sun. I flung up my arms and laughed aloud. Then I burst into tears, and falling on my knees, I thanked the Almighty Ruler of the skies for this marvellous deliverance.

Rising from my knees I looked around, and once more amazement overwhelmed me. I saw a long line of mountains towering up to immeasurable heights, their summits covered with eternal ice and snow. There the sun blazed low in the sky, elevated but a few degrees above the mountain crests, which gleamed in gold and purple under its fiery rays. The sun seemed enlarged to unusual dimensions, and the mountains ran away on every side like the segment of some infinite circle. At the base of the mountains lay a land all green with vegetation, where cultivated fields were visible, and vineyards and orchards and groves, together with forests of palm and all manner of trees of every variety of hue, which ran up the sides of the mountains till they reached the limits of vegetation and the regions of snow and ice.

Here in all directions there were unmistakable signs of human life—the outlines of populous cities and busy towns and hamlets; roads winding far away along the plain or up the mountain-sides, and mighty works of industry in the shape of massive structures, terraced slopes, long rows of arches, ponderous pyramids, and battlemented walls.

From the land I turned to the sea. I saw before me an expanse of water intensely blue—an extent so vast that never before in all my ocean voyages had anything appeared at all comparable with it. Out at sea, wherever I had been, the water had always limited the view; the horizon had never seemed far away; ships soon sank below it, and the visible surface of the earth was thus always contracted; but here, to my bewilderment, the horizon appeared to be removed to an immeasurable distance and raised high in the air, while the waters were prolonged endlessly. Starting from where I was, they went away to inconceivable distances, and the view before me seemed like a watery declivity reaching for a thousand miles, till it approached the horizon far up in the sky. Nor was it any delusion of the senses that caused this unparalleled spectacle. I was familiar with the phenomena of the mirage, and knew well that there was nothing of that kind here; for the mirage always shows great surfaces of stillness, or a regular vibration—glassy tides and indistinct distances; but here everything was sharply defined in the clear atmosphere: the sky overhung a deep blue vault; the waves danced and sparkled in the sun; the waters rolled and foamed on every side; and the fresh breeze, as it blew over the ocean, brought with it such exhilarating influences that it acted upon
me like some reviving cordial.

From the works of nature I turned to those of man. These were visible everywhere: on the land, in cities and cultivated fields and mighty constructions; on the sea, in floating craft, which appeared wherever I turned my eyes—boats like those of fishermen, ships long and low, some like galleys, propelled by a hundred oars, others provided with one huge square-sail, which enabled them to run before the wind. They were unlike any ships which I had ever seen; for neither in the Mediterranean nor in Chinese waters were there any craft like these, and they reminded me rather of those ancient galleys which I had seen in pictures.

I was lost in wonder as to where I was, and what land this could be to which I had been brought. I had not plunged into the interior of the earth, but I had been carried under the mountains, and had emerged again into the glad light of the sun. Could it be possible, I thought, that Agnew's hope had been realized, and that I had been carried into the warm regions of the South Pacific Ocean? Yet in the South Pacific there could be no place like this—no immeasurable expanse of waters, no horizon raised mountain high. It seemed like a vast basin-shaped world, for all around me the surface appeared to rise, and I was in what looked like a depression; yet I knew that the basin and the depression were an illusion, and that this appearance was due to the immense extent of level surface with the environment of lofty mountains. I had crossed the antarctic circle; I had been borne onward for an immense distance. Over all the known surface of the earth no one had ever seen anything like this; there were but two places where such an immeasurable plain was possible, and those were at the flattened poles. Where I was I now knew well. I had reached the antarctic pole. Here the earth was flat—an immense level with no roundness to lessen the reach of the horizon but an almost even surface that gave an unimpeded view for hundreds of miles.

The subterranean channel had rushed through the mountains and had carried me here. Here came all the waters of the Northern ocean pouring into this vast polar sea, perhaps to issue forth from it by some similar passage. Here, then, was the South Pole—a world by itself: and how different from that terrible, that iron land on the other side of the mountains!—not a world of ice and frost, but one of beauty and light, with a climate that was almost tropical in its warmth, and lands that were covered with the rank luxuriance of a teeming vegetable life. I had passed from that outer world to this inner one, and the passage was from death unto life, from agony and despair to sunlight and splendor and joy. Above all, in all around me that which most impressed me now was the rich and superabundant life, and a warmth of air which made me think of India. It was an amazing and an unaccountable thing, and I could only attribute it to the flattening of the poles, which brought the surface nearer to the supposed central fires of the earth, and therefore created a heat as great as that of the equatorial regions. Here I found a tropical climate—a land warmed not by the sun, but from the earth itself. Or another cause might be found in the warm ocean currents. Whatever the true one might be, I was utterly unable to form a conjecture.

But I had no time for such speculations as these. After the first emotions of wonder and admiration had somewhat subsided, I began to experience other sensations. I began to remember that I had eaten nothing for a length of time that I had no means of calculating, and to look around to see if there was any way of satisfying my hunger. The question arose now, What was to be done? After my recent terrible experience I naturally shrank from again committing myself to the tender mercies of strange tribes; yet further thought and examination showed me that the people of this strange land must be very different from those frightful savages on the other side of the mountains. Everywhere I beheld the manifest signs of cultivation and civilization. Still, I knew that even civilized people would not necessarily be any kinder than savages, and that I might be seized and flung into hopeless imprisonment or slavery.

So I hesitated, yet what could I do? My hunger was beginning to be insupportable. I had reached a place where I had to choose between starvation on the one hand, or a venture among these people on the other. To go back was impossible. Who could breast those waters in the tremendous subterranean channel, or force his way back through such appalling dangers? Or, if that were possible, who could ever hope to breast those mighty currents beyond, or work his way amid everlasting ice and immeasurable seas? No; return was impossible. I had been flung into this world of wonders, and here would be my home for the remainder of my days; though I could not now imagine whether those days would be passed in peace or in bitter slavery and sorrow. Yet the decision must be made and the risk must be run. It must be so. I must land here, venture among these people, and trust in that Providence which had hitherto sustained me.

Having thus resolved at all hazards to try my fate, I rowed in toward the shore. Thus far I had seen galleys passing and small boats, but they had taken no notice of me, for the reason that they were too far away to perceive anything about me that differed from any other boat; but now, as I rowed, I noticed a galley coming down toward me. She seemed to be going in toward the shore at the very point at which I was aiming, and her course and mine must soon meet if I continued to row. After some hesitation I concluded to make signals to her, so as to attract attention; for, now that I had resolved to venture among the people here, I was anxious to end my suspense as soon as possible. So I continued rowing, and gradually drew nearer. The galley was propelled by oars, of which there
were fifty on either side. The stem was raised, and covered in like a cabin. At length I ceased rowing, and sat watching her. I soon saw that I was noticed, but this did not occur till the galley was close by me--so close, indeed, that I thought they would pass without perceiving me. I raised my hands, waved them, and gave a cry. The galley at once stopped, a boat was lowered, and some men descended and rowed toward me.

They were men of strange appearance--very small in stature and slender in frame. Their hair was black and straight, their features were quite regular, and their general expression was one of great gentleness. I was surprised to notice that they kept their eyes almost closed, as though they were weak and troubled by the glare of the sun. With their half-closed eyes they blinked at me, and then one who appeared to be their chief spoke to me. I understood not a word; and then I answered him in English, which, of course, was equally unintelligible to him. I then made signs, pointing to the mountains and endeavoring to make known to him that I had come from beyond them--that I had suffered shipwreck, that I had drifted here, and that I needed assistance. Of all this it was quite evident that they understood nothing except the fact that I needed help. The moment that they comprehended this they took me in tow and rowed back to the galley.

I found the galley to be about one hundred and fifty feet in length. For about two thirds of this length forward it was open and filled with seats, where there were about a hundred rowers, who all looked like those that I had first seen, all being of small stature, slender frames, and, moreover, all being apparently distressed by the sunlight. There was in all of them the same mild and gentle expression. In complexion and general outline of features they were not unlike Arabs, but they were entirely destitute of that hardness and austerity which the latter have. They all had beards, which were dressed in a peculiar way in plaits. Their costume varied. The rowers wore a coarse tunic, with a girdle of rope. The officers wore tunicos of fine cloth and very elegant mantles, richly embroidered, and with borders of down. They all wore broad-brimmed hats, and the one who seemed to be chief had on his some golden ornaments.

Here once more I tried to explain to them who I was. They looked at me, examining me all over, inspecting my gun, pistol, coat, trousers, boots, and hat, and talking all the time among themselves. They did not touch me, but merely showed the natural curiosity which is felt at the sight of a foreigner who has appeared unexpectedly. There was a scrupulous delicacy and a careful and even ceremonious politeness in their attitude toward me which was at once amazing and delightful. All fear and anxiety had now left me; in the gentle manners and amiable faces of these people I saw enough to assure me of kind treatment; and in my deep joy and gratitude for this even my hunger was for a time forgotten.

At length the chief motioned to me to follow him. He led the way to the cabin, where, opening the door, he entered, and I followed, after which the others came in also and then the door was shut. At first I could see nothing. There were no windows whatever, and only one or two slight crevices through which the light came. After a time my eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, and I could see that the cabin was a spacious compartment, adorned with rich hangings of some unknown material. There was a large table and seats. Taking me by the hand, the chief led me to this, where I seated myself, while the others remained standing. Then some of them went away, and soon returned with food and drink. The food was of different kinds--some tasting like goose, others like turkey, others like partridge. It was all the flesh of fowls, though, judging from the slices before me, they must have been of great size. I wondered much at the behavior of the officers of the ship, who all, and the chief himself more than all, stood and waited upon me; but it was a new world, and I supposed that this must be the fashion; so I made no objections, but accepted the situation and ate with a thankful heart.

As the first keenness of my appetite was satisfied I had more leisure to make observations. I noticed that the eyes of my new friends no longer blinked; they were wide open; and, so far as I could make them out, their faces were much improved. Weakness of eyes seemed common among these people, and therefore the officers had their cabin darkened, while the unfortunate rowers had to labor in the blazing sun. Such was my conclusion, and the fact reminded me of the miserable fellahin of Egypt, who have ophthalmia from the blazing sun and burning sand.

After the repast they brought me water in a basin, and all stood around me. One held the basin, another a towel, another a flask, another took a sponge and proceeded to wash my face and hands. This was all strange to me, yet there was nothing left for me but submission. Then the chief, who had stood looking on with a smile on his face took off his rich furred mantle and handed it to me. I was half inclined to refuse it, but was afraid of giving offence, so I accepted it, and he himself fastened it around my shoulders. The others seemed actually to envy the chief, as though he had gained some uncommon good-fortune. Then they offered me various drinks, of which I tasted several kinds. Some were sweet waters of different flavors, others tasted like mild wine, one was a fermented drink, light, sweet, and very agreeable to the palate. I now wished to show my generous entertainers that I was grateful; so I raised my cup, bowed to all of them, particularly the chief, and drank their health. They all watched this ceremony with very sober faces, and I could not quite make out whether they took my meaning or not. They certainly did not look pleased, and it seemed to me as though they felt hurt at any expression of gratitude, so I concluded for the future to
whom Lord Featherstone had brought with him.

the sumptuous cabin, prepared to discuss the repast which had been served up by the genius of the French chef

in its presence even the manuscript had to be laid aside. Before long they were all seated around the dining-table in
dinner was ready. Upon this he stopped abruptly; for on board the Falcon dinner was the great event of the day, and

reached the central portal of the range of caverns, and here we stopped. The chief got out and beckoned to me. I

and in the middle of the place there arose a singular structure, shaped like a half pyramid, with three sides sloping,

each other, and making a denser shade than usual. On the lower side were several stone edifices of immense size;

as far as I could judge, I was in a city built on the slope of a mountain, with its streets formed thus of successive
terraces and their connecting cross-ways, one half its habitations consisting of caverns, while the other half were
massive edifices with pyramidal roofs. Our road constantly ascended, and at length we came to a crossing. This was
new vistas opened; amid the verdure and the foliage were the roofs of structures that looked like pavilions, and more
massive edifices with pyramidal roofs. Our road constantly ascended, and at length we came to a crossing. This was

the view became more varied. The tree-ferns arose on either side, arching overhead with their broad fanlike leaves and branches in dense
masses, making the roadway quite dark in the shadow. Astonished as I was at the sight of these trees, I soon forgot
them in a still more astonishing sight, for after going onward about a hundred paces I stopped, and found myself in a
wide space where four cross-roads met. Here there were three birds of gigantic stature. They had vast bodies, short
legs, short necks, and seemed as large as an ordinary-sized ox. Their wings were short, and evidently could not be
used for flight; their beaks were like that of a sea-gull; each one had a man on his back, and was harnessed to a car.
The chief motioned to me to enter one of these cars. I did so. He followed, and thereupon the driver started the bird,
which set forth with long, rapid strides, at a pace fast as that of a trotting horse. So astonished was I that for some
time I did not notice anything else; but at length, when my first feeling had subsided, I began to regard other objects.
All the way the dense fern foliage arched overhead, throwing down deep shadows. They grew on either side in dense
rows, but between their stalks I could see the country beyond, which lay all bright in the sunlight.

Here were broad fields, all green with verdure; farther away arose clumps of tree-ferns; at every step of the way
new vistas opened; amid the verdure and the foliage were the roofs of structures that looked like pavilions, and more
massive edifices with pyramidal roofs. Our road constantly ascended, and at length we came to a crossing. This was
a wide terrace at the slope of the mountain; on the lower side was a row of massive stone edifices with pyramidal
roofs, while on the upper there were portals which seemed to open into excavated caverns. Here, too, on either side
arose the giant ferns, overarching and darkening the terrace with their deep shadow. From this point I looked back,
and through the trunks of the tree-ferns I could see fields and pavilions and the pyramidal roofs of massive edifices,
and broad, verdant slopes, while in the distance there were peeps of the boundless sea. We continued on our way
without stopping, and passed several successive terraces like the first, with the same caverns on the upper side and
massive edifices on the lower, until at last the ascent ended at the fifth terrace, and here we turned to the left. Now
the view became more varied. The tree-ferns arose on either side, arching overhead; on my right were the portals
that opened into caverns, on my left solid and massive houses, built of great blocks of stone, with pyramidal roofs.
As far as I could judge, I was in a city built on the slope of a mountain, with its streets formed thus of successive
terraces and their connecting cross-ways, one half its habitations consisting of caverns, while the other half were
massive edifices with pyramidal roofs. Few people, however, were to be seen. Occasionally I saw one or two
groping along with their eyes half shut, seeking the darkest shadows; and it seemed to me that this extraordinary
race of men had some natural and universal peculiarity of eyesight which made them shun the sunlight, and seek the
darkness of caves and of dense, overshadowing foliage.

At length we came to a place where the terrace ran back till it formed a semicircle against the mountain slope,
when several vast portals appeared. Here there was a large space, where the tree-ferns grew in long lines crossing
each other, and making a denser shade than usual. On the lower side were several stone edifices of immense size;
and in the middle of the place there arose a singular structure, shaped like a half pyramid, with three sides sloping,
and the fourth perpendicular, flat on the top, which was approached by a flight of steps. We now went on until we
reached the central portal of the range of caverns, and here we stopped. The chief got out and beckoned to me. I
followed. He then led the way into the cavern, while I, full of wonder, walked behind him.

CHAPTER VII
SCIENTIFIC THEORIES AND SCEPTICISM
Thus far Melick had been reading the manuscript, but at this point he was interrupted by the announcement that
dinner was ready. Upon this he stopped abruptly; for on board the Falcon dinner was the great event of the day, and
in its presence even the manuscript had to be laid aside. Before long they were all seated around the dining-table in
the sumptuous cabin, prepared to discuss the repast which had been served up by the genius of the French chef
whom Lord Featherstone had brought with him.
Let us pause here for a moment to take a minuter survey of these four friends. In the first place, there was Lord Featherstone himself, young, handsome, languid, good-natured to a fault, with plenty of muscle if he chose to exert it, and plenty of brain if he chose to make use of it—a man who had become weary of the monotony of high life, and, like many of his order, was fond of seeking relief from the ennui of prosperity amid the excitements of the sea. Next to him was Dr. Congreve, a middle-aged man, with iron-gray hair, short beard and mustache, short nose, gray eyes, with spectacles, and stoutish body. Next came Noel Oxenden, late of Trinity College, Cambridge, a college friend of Featherstone’s—a tall man, with a refined and intellectual face and reserved manner. Finally, there was Otto Melick, a litterateur from London, about thirty years of age, with a wiry and muscular frame, and the restless manner of one who lives in a perpetual fidget.

For some time nothing was said; they partook of the repast in silence; but at length it became evident that they were thinking of the mysterious manuscript. Featherstone was the first to speak.

"A deuced queer sort of thing this, too," said he, "this manuscript. I can't quite make it out. Who ever dreamed of people living at the South Pole—and in a warm climate, too? Then it seems deuced odd, too, that we should pick up this copper cylinder with the manuscript. I hardly know what to think about it."

Melick smiled. "Why, it isn't much to see through," said he.

"See through what?" said the doctor, hastily, pricking up his ears at this, and peering keenly at Melick through his spectacles.

"Why, the manuscript, of course."
"Well," said the doctor, "what is it that you see? What do you make out of it?"
"Why, anyone can see," said Melick, "that it's a transparent hoax, that's all. You don't mean to say, I hope, that you really regard it in any other light?"
"A transparent hoax!" repeated the doctor. "Will you please state why you regard it in that light?"
"Certainly," said Melick. "Some fellow wanted to get up a sensation novel and introduce it to the world with a great flourish of trumpets, and so he has taken this way of going about it. You see, he has counted on its being picked up, and perhaps published. After this he would come forward and own the authorship."

"And what good would that do?" asked the doctor, mildly. "He couldn't prove the authorship, and he couldn't get the copyright."

"Oh, of course not; but he would gain notoriety, and that would give him a great sale for his next effort."

The doctor smiled. "See here, Melick," said he, "you've a very vivid imagination, my dear fellow; but come, let us discuss this for a little while in a common-sense way. Now how long should you suppose that this manuscript has been afloat?"

"Oh, a few months or so," said Melick.

"A few months!" said the doctor. "A few years you mean. Why, man, there are successive layers of barnacles on that copper cylinder which show a submersion of at least three years, perhaps more."

"By Jove! yes," remarked Featherstone. "Your sensation novelist must have been a lunatic if he chose that way of publishing a book."

"Then, again," continued the doctor, "how did it get here?"
"Oh, easily enough," answered Melick. "The ocean currents brought it."

"The ocean currents!" repeated the doctor. "That's a very vague expression. What do you mean? Of course it has been brought here by the ocean currents."

"Why, if it were thrown off the coast of England it would be carried away, in the ordinary course of things, and might make the tour of the world."

"The ocean currents," said the doctor, "have undoubtedly brought this to us. Of that I shall have more to say presently—but just now, in reference to your notion of a sensation novelist, and an English origin, let me ask your opinion of the material on which it is written. Did you ever see anything like it before? Is it paper?"

"No," said Melick; "it is evidently some vegetable substance. No doubt the writer has had it prepared for this very purpose, so as to make it look natural."

"Do you know what is it?" asked the doctor.

"No."

"Then I'll tell you; it's papyrus."

"Papyrus?"

"Yes, actual papyrus. You can find but little of that in existence at the present day. It is only to be found here and there in museums. I know it perfectly well, however, and saw what it was at the first glance. Now, I hold that a sensation novelist would never have thought of papyrus. If he didn't wish to use paper, he could have found a dozen other things. I don't see how he could have found anyone able to prepare such a substance as this for writing. It must have come from a country where it is actually in use. Now, mark you, the papyrus-plant may still be found growing
wild on the banks of the upper Nile, and also in Sicily, and it is made use of for ropes and other things of that sort. But as to making writing material out of it, that is hardly possible for the art is lost. The ancient process was very elaborate and this manuscript is written on leaves which resembled in a marvellous manner those of the Egyptian papyrus books. There are two rolls at Marseilles which I have seen and examined, and they are identical with this. Now these papyrus leaves indicate much mechanical skill, and have a professional look. They seem like the work of an experienced manufacturer."

"I don't see," said Melick, obstinately, "why one shouldn't get papyrus now and have it made up into writing material."

"Oh, that's out of the question," said the doctor. "How could it ever enter into anyone's head? How could your mere sensation-monger procure the raw material? That of itself would be a work of immense difficulty. How could he get it made up? That would be impossible. But, apart from this, just consider the strong internal evidence that there is as to the authenticity of the manuscript. Now, in the first place, there is the description of Desolation Island, which is perfectly accurate. But it is on his narrative beyond this that I lay chief stress. I can prove that the statements here are corroborated by those of Captain Ross in his account of that great voyage from which he returned not very long ago."

The doctor, who had been talking with much enthusiasm, paused here to take breath, and then went on:

"I happen to know all about that voyage, for I read a full report of it just before we started, and you can see for yourselves whether this manuscript iscredible or not.

"Captain James Clarke Ross was sent forth on his expedition in 1839. On January 1, 1841, he passed the antarctic circle in 178 degrees east longitude. On the 11th he discovered land in 70 degrees 41' south latitude, 172 degrees 36' east longitude. He found that the land was a continuous coast, trending southward, and rising to peaks of ten thousand feet in height, all covered with ice and snow. On the 12th he landed and took possession in the name of the Queen. After this he continued his course as far as 78 degrees 4' south latitude, 167 degrees 27' west longitude. At this point he was again stopped by the impassable cliffs, which arose here like an eternal barrier, while beyond them he saw a long line of lofty mountains covered with ice and snow."

"Did you hear the result of the American expedition?" asked Melick.

"Yes," replied the doctor. "Wilkes pretends to have found a continent, but his account of it makes it quite evident to my mind that he saw nothing but ice. I believe that Wilkes's antarctic continent will some day be penetrated by ships, which will sail for hundreds of miles farther south. All that is wanted is a favorable season. But mark the coincidence between Ross's report and More's manuscript. This must have been written at least three years ago, and the writer could not have known anything about Ross's discoveries. Above all, he could not have thought of those two volcanoes unless he had seen them."

"But these volcanoes mentioned by More are not the Erebus and Terror, are they?" said Lord Featherstone.

"Of course not; they are on the other side of the world."

"The whole story," said Melick, "may have been written by one of Ross's men and thrown overboard. If I'd been on that expedition I should probably have written it to beguile the time."

"Oh yes," said the doctor; "and you would also have manufactured the papyrus and the copper cylinder on board to beguile the time."

"I dare say the writer picked up that papyrus and the copper cylinder in China or Japan, and made use of it in this way."

"Where do you make out the position of More's volcanoes?" asked Featherstone.

"It is difficult to make it out accurately," said the doctor. "More gives no data. In fact he had none to give. He couldn't take any observations."

"The fact is," said Melick, "it's not a sailor's yarn at all. No sailor would ever express himself in that way. That's what struck me from the first. It has the ring of a confounded sensation-monger all through."

The doctor elevated his eyebrows, but took no notice of this.

"You see," he continued, addressing himself to the others, "Desolation Island is in 50 degrees south latitude and 70 degrees east longitude. As I make out, More's course led him over about ten degrees of longitude in a southwest course. That course depended altogether upon the ocean currents. Now there is a great antarctic drift-current, which
flows round the Cape of Good Hope and divides there, one half flowing past the east coast of Africa and the other setting across the Indian Ocean. Then it unites with a current which flows round the south of Van Dieman's Land, which also divides, and the southernmost current is supposed to cross the Pacific until it strikes Cape Horn, around which it flows, dividing as before. Now my theory is, that south of Desolation Island--I don't know how far--there is a great current setting toward the South Pole, and running southwest through degrees of longitude 60, 50, 40, 30, 20, 10, east of Greenwich; and finally sweeping on, it would reach More's volcanoes at a point which I should judge to be about 80 degrees south latitude and 10 degrees west longitude. There it passes between the volcanoes and bursts through the vast mountain barrier by a subterranean way, which has been formed for it in past ages by some primeval convulsion of nature. After this it probably sweeps around the great South Polar ocean, and emerges at the opposite side, not far from the volcanoes Erebus and Terror."

Here the doctor paused, and looked around with some self-complacency.

"Oh," said Melick, "if you take that tone, you have us all at your mercy. I know no more about the geography of the antarctic circle than I do of the moon. I simply criticize from a literary point of view, and I don't like his underground cavern with the stream running through it. It sounds like one of the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor. Nor do I like his description; he evidently is writing for effect. Besides, his style is vicious; it is too stilted. Finally, he has recourse to the stale device of a sea-serpent."

"A sea-serpent!" repeated the doctor. "Well, for my part I feel by no means inclined to sneer at a sea-serpent. Its existence cannot be proved, yet it cannot be pooh-poohed. Every schoolboy knows that the waters of the sea were once filled with monsters more tremendous than the greatest sea-serpent that has ever been imagined. The plesiosaurus, with its snakelike head, if it existed now, would be called a sea-serpent. Some of these so-called fossil animals may have their representatives still living in the remoter parts of the world. Think of the recently discovered ornithorhynchus of Australasia!"

"If you please, I'd really much rather not," said Melick with a gesture of despair. "I haven't the honor of the gentleman's acquaintance."

"Well, what do you think of his notice of the sun, and the long light, and his low position on the horizon?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Melick. "Anyone who chose to get up this thing would of course read up about the polar day, and all that. Everyone knows that at the poles there is a six-months' day, followed by a six-months' night."

"You are a determined sceptic," said the doctor.

"How is it about the polar day?" asked Featherstone.

"Well," said the doctor, "at the poles themselves there is one day of six months, during which the sun never sets, and one night of six months, during which he never rises. In the spaces between the polar circles the quantities of the continuous day and continuous night vary in accordance with the distance from the pole. At the north point of Nova Zembla, 75 degrees north latitude, there is uninterrupted light from May 1st to August 12th, and uninterrupted darkness from November 8th to February 9th. At the arctic circle at the summer solstice the day is twenty-four hours long. At the antarctic circle at the same time the night is twenty-four hours long."

Upon this Melick filled the doctor's wine-glass with a great deal of ceremony.

"After all those statistics," he said, "you must feel rather dry. You should take a drink before venturing any further."

The doctor made no reply, but raised the glass to his lips and swallowed the wine in an abstracted way.

"The thing that struck me most," said Oxenden, "in all that has been read thus far, is the flatness of the South Pole, and the peculiar effect which this produces on the landscape."

"I must say," added Melick, "that the writer has got hold of a very good idea there, and has taken care to put it forward in a very prominent fashion."

"What is the difference," asked Oxenden, "between the two diameters of the earth, the polar and the equatorial? Is it known?"

"By Jove!" said Featherstone, "that's the very question I was going to ask. I've always heard that the earth is flattened at the poles, but never knew how much. Is there any way by which people can find out?"

The doctor drew a long breath, and beamed upon the company with a benevolent smile.

"Oh yes," said he; "I can answer that question, if you care to know and won't feel bored."

"Answer it, then, my dear fellow, by all means," said Featherstone, in his most languid tone.

"There are two ways," said the doctor, "by which the polar compression of the earth has been found out. One is by the measurement of arcs on the earth's surface; the other is by experiments with pendulums or weights with regard to the earth's gravity at different places. The former of these methods is, perhaps, the more satisfactory. Measurements of arcs have been made on a very extensive scale in different parts of the world--in England, France, Lapland, Peru, and India. Mr. Ivory, who devoted himself for years to an exhaustive examination of the subject, has deduced that the equatorial radius of the earth is over 3962 miles, and the polar radius over 3949 miles. This makes"
the depression at either pole upward of thirteen miles. A depression of over thirteen miles, as you must plainly see, should produce strange results in the scenery at the poles. Of course, if there are mountains, no difference would be noticed between this and any other part of the earth's surface; but if there is water, why, we ought to expect some such state of things as More describes. The gravitation test has also been tried, with very nearly the same result. The surface of the earth at the equator, being farthest from the centre of gravity, indicates the least weight in bodies; but at the poles, where the surface is nearest the centre of gravity, there must be the greatest weight. It is found, in fact, that the weight of bodies increases in passing from the equator to the poles. By experiments made in this way the polar compression is ascertained to be the same as I have mentioned."

"What effect would this have on the climate at the poles?" asked Oxenden.

"That's a complicated question," said the doctor. "In answer to that we must leave ascertained facts and trust to theories, unless, indeed, we accept as valid the statements of this remarkable manuscript. For my own part, I see no reason why it should not be as More says. Remember, this polar world is thirteen miles nearer to the centre of the earth. Whether this should affect the climate or not, depends upon the nature of the earth's interior. That interior, according to the popular theory of the present day is a mass of fire. This theory affirms that the earth was once a red-hot mass, which has cooled down; but the cooling process has only take place on the surface, leaving the interior still a molten mass of matter in a state of intense heat and combustion. At the poles the surface is thus thirteen miles nearer to these tremendous fires. Of course it may be supposed that the earth's crust is of about equal thickness on all parts; yet still, even if this be so, thirteen miles ought to make some difference. Now at the North Pole there seem to be causes at work to counterbalance the effect of the internal heat, chiefly in the enormous accumulation of polar ice which probably hems it in on every side; and though many believe in an open polar sea of warm water at the North Pole, yet still the effect of vast ice-masses and of cold submarine currents must be to render the climate severe. But at the South Pole it is different. The observations of Ross and of More show us that there is a chain of mountains of immense height, which seem to encircle the pole. If this be so, and I see no reason to disbelieve it, then the ice of the outer seas must be kept away altogether from that strange inner sea of which More speaks. Ross saw the volcanoes Erebus and Terror; More saw two others. How many more there may be it is impossible to say; but all this shows that the effect of the earth's internal fires is very manifest in that region, and More has penetrated to a secluded world, which lies apart by itself, free from the influence of ice-masses, left to feel the effect of the internal fires, and possessing what is virtually a tropical climate."

"Well," said Melick, "there is no theory however wild and fantastic, which some man of science will not be ready to support and to fortify by endless arguments, all of the most plausible kind. For my own part, I still believe More and his south polar world to be no more authentic than Sindbad the Sailor."

But the others evidently sympathized with the doctor's view, and regarded Melick as carrying his scepticism to an absurd excess.

"How large do you suppose this south polar ocean to be?" asked Featherstone.

"It is impossible to answer that question exactly," said the doctor. "It may be, as More hints, a thousand miles in extent, or only five hundred, or two hundred. For my own part, however, I feel like taking More's statements at their utmost value; and the idea that I have gathered from his narrative is that of a vast sea like the Mediterranean, surrounded by impassable mountains, by great and fertile countries, peopled with an immense variety of animals, with a fauna and flora quite unlike those of the rest of the world; and, above all, with great nations possessing a rare and unique civilization, and belonging to a race altogether different from any of the known races of men."

"Well," said Melick, "that at least is the idea which the writer of the manuscript tries to convey."

By this time they had finished dinner.

"And now," said Featherstone, "let's have some more of the manuscript. Melick is tired of it, I dare say. I would relieve him, but I'm an infernally bad reader. Doctor, what do you say? Will you read the next instalment?"

"With all my heart," said the doctor, briskly.
"Very well, then," said Featherstone; "we will all be your attentive hearers."

And now the doctor took up the manuscript and began to read.

CHAPTER VIII
THE CAVE-DWELLERS

The cavern into which the chief led me was very spacious, but had no light except that which entered through the portal. It was with difficulty that I could see anything, but I found that there were many people here moving about, all as intent upon their own pursuits as those which one encounters in the streets of our cities. As we went on farther the darkness increased, until at last I lost sight of the chief altogether, and he had to come back and lead me. After going a little farther we came to a long, broad passage-way like a subterranean street, about twenty feet in width, and as many in height. Here there were discernible a few twinkling lamps, which served to make the darkness less intense and enabled me to see the shadowy figures around. These were numerous, and all seemed busy, though what their occupation might be I could not guess. I was amazed at the extent of these caverns, and at the multitude of the people. I saw also that from the nature of their eyes the sunlight distressed them, and in this cavern gloom they found their most congenial dwelling-place. From what I had thus far seen, this extraordinary people shrank from the sunlight; and when they had to move abroad they passed over roads which were darkened as much as possible by the deep shadows of mighty ferns, while for the most part they remained in dark caverns, in which they lived and moved and had their being. It was a puzzle to me whether the weakness of their eyes had caused this dislike of light, or the habit of cave-dwelling had caused this weakness of eyes. Here, in this darkness, where there was but a faint twinkle from the feeble lamps, their eyes seemed to serve them as well as mine did in the outer light of day; and the chief, who outside had moved with an uncertain step, and had blinked painfully at objects with his eyes almost closed, now appeared to be in his proper element; and while I hesitated like a blind man and groped along with a faltering step, he guided me, and seemed to see everything with perfect vision.

At length we stopped, and the chief raised up a thick, heavy mat which hung like an unwieldy curtain in front of a doorway. This the chief lifted. At once a blaze of light burst forth, gleaming into the dark, and appearing to blind him. His eyes closed. He held up the veil for me to pass through. I did so. He followed, and then groped his way slowly along, while I accompanied and assisted him.

I now found myself in a large grotto with an arched roof, from which was suspended an enormous lamp, either golden or gilded. All around were numerous lamps. The walls were adorned with rich hangings; couches were here, with soft cushions, and divans and ottomans; soft mats were on the floor, and everything gave indications of luxury and wealth. Other doors, covered with overhanging mats, seemed to lead out of this grotto. To one of these the chief walked, and raising the mat he led the way into another grotto like the last, with the same bright lights and the same adornments, but of smaller size. Here I saw someone who at once took up all my attention.

It was a young maiden. Her face and form, but especially her eyes, showed her to be of quite a different race from these others. To me she was of medium height, yet she was taller than any of the people here that I had hitherto seen. Her complexion was much lighter; her hair was dark, luxuriant, and wavy, and arranged in a coiffure secured with a golden band. Her features were of a different cast from those of the people here, for they were regular in outline and of exquisite beauty; her nose was straight; she had a short upper lip, arched eyebrows finely pencilled, thin lips, and well-rounded chin. But the chief contrast was in her eyes. These were large, dark, liquid, with long lashes, and with a splendid glow in their lustrous depths. She stood looking at me with her face full of amazement; as the chief spoke to her a change came over her face. She smiled and nodded, and pointed to my gun, which thus far I had carried in my hand. I smiled and laid it down. She accepted it in a friendly spirit, and seemed to consider it my foreign fashion of showing friendship and respect. To my great delight she accepted it in a friendly spirit, and seemed to consider it my foreign fashion of showing friendship and respect. She smiled and nodded, and pointed to my gun, which thus far I had carried in my hand. I smiled and laid it down. Then she pointed to a seat. I sat down, and then she seated herself close by me, and we looked at each other in mutual wonder and mutual inquiry.

I was full of amazement at thus meeting with so exquisite a being, and lost myself in conjectures as to her race, her office, and her position here. Who was she, or what? She was unlike the others, and reminded me of those Oriental beauties whose portraits I had seen in annuals and illustrated books. Her costume was in keeping with such
a character. She wore a long tunic that reached from the neck to the ground, secured at the waist with a golden girdle; the sleeves were long and loose; over this she had a long mantle; on her feet were light slippers, white and glistening. All about her, in her room and in her costume, spoke of light and splendor and luxury. To these others who shrank so from the light she could not be related in any way. The respect with which she was treated by the chief, the peculiar splendor of her apartments, seemed to indicate some high rank. Was she, then, the queen of the land? Was she a princess? I could not tell. At any rate, whatever she was, she seemed anxious to show me the utmost attention. Her manner was full of dignity and sweet graciousness, and she appeared particularly anxious to make herself understood. At first she spoke in a language that sounded like that of the chief, and was full of gutturals and broad vowels; afterward she spoke in another that was far more euphonious. I, on the other hand spoke in English and in French; but of course I was as unintelligible to her as she was to me.

Language was, therefore, of no use. It was necessary to go back to first principles and make use of signs, or try to gain the most elementary words of her language; so first of all I pointed to her, and tried to indicate that I wanted to know her name. She caught my meaning at once, and, pointing to herself, she looked fixedly at me and said, "Almah, Almah!"

I repeated these words after her, saying, "Almah, Almah!" She smiled and nodded, and then pointed to me with a look of inquiry that plainly asked for my name. I said "Adam More." She repeated this, and it sounded like "Atam-or." But as she spoke this slowly her smile died away. She looked anxious and troubled, and once more that expression of wondering sadness came over her face. She repeated my name over and over in this way with a mournful intonation that thrilled through me, and excited forebodings of evil. "Atamor, Atamor!" And always after that she called me "Atamor."

But now she sat for some time, looking at me with a face full of pity and distress. At this I was greatly astonished; for but a moment before she had been full of smiles, and it was as though something in my name had excited sorrowful thoughts. Yet how could that be, since she could never by any possibility have heard my name before? The beautiful Almah seemed to be not altogether happy, or why should she be so quick to sadness? There was a mystery about all this which was quite unaccountable.

It was a singular situation, and one which excided within me feelings of unutterable delight. This light and splendor, this warmth and peace--what a contrast it offered to the scenes through which I had but lately passed! Those scenes of horror, of ice and snow, of storm and tempest, of cold and hunger, of riven cliff and furious ocean stream, and, above all, that crowning agony in the bleak iron-land of the cannibals--from all these I had escaped. I had been drawn down under the earth to experience the terrors of that unspeakable passage, and had at last emerged to light and life, to joy and hope. In this grotto I had found the culmination of all happiness. It was like a fairy realm; and here was one whose very look was enough to inspire the most despairing soul with hop and peace and happiness. The, only thing that was now left to trouble me was this mournful face of Almah. Why did she look at me with such sad interest and such melancholy meaning? Did she know of any evil fate in store for me? Yet how could there be any evil fate to be feared from people who had received me with such unparalleled generosity? No, it could not be; so I resolved to try to bring back again the smile that had faded out of her face.

I pointed to her, and said, "Almah."

She said, "Atam-or."

And the smile did not come back, but the sadness remained in her face.

My eager desire now was to learn her language, and I resolved at once to acquire as many words and phrases as possible. I began by asking the names of things, such as "seat," "table," "mat," "coat," "hat," "shoe," "lamp," "floor," "wall," and all the common objects around. She gave all the names, and soon became so deeply interested that her sadness departed, and the smile came back once more. For my own part, I was always rather quick at learning languages. I had a correct ear and a retentive memory; in my wanderings round the world I had picked up a smattering of many languages, such as French, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, German, Hindoostanee, and a few others. The words which I learned from Almah had a remote resemblance to Arabic; and, in fact, my knowledge of Arabic was actually of some assistance, though how it was that these people should have a language with that resemblance was certainly a mystery, and I did not try to solve it. The beautiful Almah soon grew immensely interested in my efforts to learn, and also in the English words which I gave when I pointed to any object.

Thus I pointed to myself, and said "Man," then pointing to her, I said, "Woman." She laughed, and pointing to me said "Iz," and pointing to herself said, "Izza." Then I pointed to the row of lights, and said "Light," she did the same, and said, "Or." Then her face grew mournful, and she pointed to me, saying "Atam-or." It struck me then that there was some chance resemblance between "or," the word meaning "light," and one of the syllables of my name as she pronounced it, and that this might cause her sadness; but as I could make out nothing of this, I dismissed the thought, and went on with my questions. This took up the time, until at length someone appeared who looked like a servant. He said something, whereupon Almah arose and beckoned to me to follow. I did so, and we went to a
neighboring apartment, where there was spread a bounteous repast. Here we sat and ate, and Almah told me the names of all the dishes. After dinner we returned to the room.

It was a singular and a delightful position. I was left alone with the beautiful Almah, who herself showed the utmost graciousness and the kindest interest in me. I could not understand it, nor did I try to; it was enough that I had such a happy lot. For hours we thus were together, and I learned many words. To insure remembrance, I wrote them down in my memorandum-book with a pencil and both of these were regarded by Almah with greatest curiosity. She felt the paper, inspected it, touched it with her tongue, and seemed to admire it greatly; but the pencil excited still greater admiration. I signed to her to write in the book. She did so, but the characters were quite unlike anything that I had ever seen. They were not joined like our writing and like Arabic letters, but were separate like our printed type, and were formed in an irregular manner. She then showed me a book made of a strange substance. It was filled with characters like those which she had just written. The leaves were not at all like paper, but seemed like some vegetable product, such as the leaves of a plant or the bark of a tree. They were very thin, very smooth, all cut into regular size, and fastened together by means of rings. This manuscript is written upon the same material. I afterward found that it was universally used here, and was made of a reed that grows in marshes.

Here in these vast caverns there was no way by which I could tell the progress of time, but Almah had her own way of finding out when the hours of wakeful life were over. She arose and said, "Salonla." This I afterward found out to be common salutation of the country. I said it after her. She then left me. Shortly afterward a servant appeared, who took me to a room, which I understood to be mine. Here I found everything that I could wish, either for comfort or luxury; and as I felt fatigue, I flung myself upon the soft bed of down, and soon was sound asleep.

I slept for a long time. When I awoke I heard sounds in the distance, and knew that people were moving. Here in these caverns there was no difference between day and night, but, by modes of which I was ignorant, a regular succession was observed of waking times and sleeping times.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAVERN OF THE DEAD

On going forth into the outer grotto I saw the table spread with a sumptuous repast, and the apartment in a blaze of light. Almah was not here; and though some servants made signs for me to eat, yet I could not until I should see whether she was coming or not. I had to wait for a long time, however; and while I was waiting the chief entered, shading his eyes with his hand from the painful light. He bowed low with the most profound courtesy, saying, "Salonla," to which I responded in the same way. He seemed much pleased at this, and made a few remarks, which I did not understand; whereupon, anxious to lose no time in learning the language, I repeated to him all the words I knew, and asked after others. I pointed to him and asked his name. He said, "Kohen." This, however, I afterward found was not a name, but a title. The "Kohen" did not remain long, for the light was painful. After his departure I was alone for some time, and at length Almah made her appearance. I sprang to meet her, full of joy, and took her hand in both of mine and pressed it warmly. She smiled, and appeared quite free from the melancholy of the previous day.

We ate our breakfast together, after which we went out into the world of light, groping our way along through the dark passages amid the busy crowd. Almah could see better than I in the darkness; but she was far from seeing well, and did not move with that easy step and perfect certainty which all the others showed. Like me, she was a child of light, and the darkness was distressing to her. As we went on we were seen by all, but were apparently not considered prisoners. On the contrary, all looked at us with the deepest respect, and bowed low or moved aside, and occasionally made little offerings of fruit or flowers to one or the other of us. It seemed to me that we were treated with equal distinction; and if Almah was their queen, I, their guest, was regarded with equal honor. Whatever her rank might be, however, she was to all appearance the most absolute mistress of her own actions, and moved about among all these people with the independence and dignity of some person of exalted rank.

At length we emerged into the open air. Here the contrast to the cavern gloom inside gave to the outer world unusual brightness and splendor, so that even under the heavy overarching tree-ferns, which had seemed so dark when I was here before, it now appeared light and cheerful. Almah turned to the right, and we walked along the terrace. But few people were visible. They shrank from the light, and kept themselves in the caverns. Then after a few steps we came to the base of a tall half-pyramid, the summit of which was above the tops of the trees. I pointed to this, as though I wished to go up. Almah hesitated for a moment, and seemed to shrink back, but at length, overcoming her reluctance, began the ascent. A flight of stony steps led up. On reaching the top, I found it about thirty feet long by fifteen wide, with a high stone table in the middle. At that moment, however, I scarce noticed the pyramid summit, and I only describe it now because I was fated before long to see it with different feelings. What I then noticed was the vast and wondrous display of all the glories of nature that burst at once upon my view. There was that same boundless sea, rising up high toward the horizon, as I had seen it before, and suggesting infinite extent. There were the blue waters breaking into foam, the ships traversing the deep, the far-encircling shores green
in vegetation, the high rampart of ice-bound mountains that shut in the land, making it a world by itself. There was
the sun, low on the horizon, which it traversed on its long orbit, lighting up all these scenes till the six-months day
should end and the six-months night begin.

For a long time I stood feasting my eyes upon all this splendor, and at length turned to see whether Almah
shared my feelings. One look was enough. She stood absorbed in the scene, as though she were drinking in deep
draughts of all this matchless beauty. I felt amazed at this; I saw how different she seemed from the others, and
could not account for it. But as yet I knew too little of the language to question her, and could only hope for a future
explanation when I had learned more.

We descended at length and walked about the terrace and up and down the side streets. All were the same as I
had noticed before--terraced streets, with caverns on one side and massive stone structures on the other. I saw deep
channels, which were used as drains to carry down mountain torrents. I did not see all at this first walk, but I
inspected the whole city in many subsequent walks until its outlines were all familiar. I found it about a mile long
and about half a mile wide, constructed in a series of terraces, which rose one above another in a hollow of the
mountains round a harbor of the sea. On my walks I met with but few people on the streets, and they all seemed
troubled with the light. I saw also occasionally some more of those great birds, the name of which I learned from
Almah; it was "opkuk."

For some time my life went on most delightfully. I found myself surrounded with every comfort and luxury.
Almah was my constant associate, and all around regarded us with the profoundest respect. The people were the
mildest, most gentle, and most generous that I had ever seen. The Kohen seemed to pass most of his time in making
new contrivances for my happiness. This strange people, in their dealings with me and with one another, seemed
animated by a universal desire to do kindly acts; and the only possible objection against them was their singular love
of darkness.

My freedom was absolute. No one watched me. Almah and I could go where we chose. So far as I could
perceive, we were quite at liberty, if we wished, to take a boat and escape over the sea. It seemed also quite likely
that if we had ordered out a galley and a gang of oarsmen, we should have been supplied with all that we might want
in the most cheerful manner. Such a thought, however, was absurd. Flight! Why should I think of flying?

I had long ago lost all idea of time; and here, where it was for the present perpetual day, I was more at a loss
than ever. I supposed that it was somewhere in the month of March, but whether at the beginning or the end I could
not tell. The people had a regular system of wake-time and sleep-time, by which they ordered their lives; but
whether these respective times were longer or shorter than the days and nights at home I could not tell at that time,
though I afterward learned all about it. On the whole, I was perfectly content--nay, more, perfectly happy; more so,
indeed, than ever in my life, and quite willing to forget home and friends and everything in the society of Almah.
While in her company there was always one purpose upon which I was most intent, and that was to master the
language. I made rapid progress, and while she was absent I sought out others, especially the Kohen, with whom to
practice. The Kohen was always most eager to aid me in every conceivable way or to any conceivable thing; and he
had such a gentle manner and showed such generous qualities that I soon learned to regard him with positive
affection.

Almah was always absent for several hours after I rose in the morning, and when she made her appearance it
was with the face and manner of one who had returned from some unpleasant task. It always took some time for her
to regain that cheerfulness which she usually showed. I soon felt a deep curiosity to learn the nature of her
employment and office here, and as my knowledge of the language increased I began to question her. My first
attempts were vain. She looked at me with indescribable mournfulness and shook her head. This, however, only
confirmed me in my suspicions that her duties, whatever they might be, were of a painful nature; so I urged her to
tell me, and asked her as well as I could if I might not share them or help her in some way. To all this, however, she
only returned sighs and mournful looks for an answer. It seemed to me, from her manner and from the general
behavior of the people, that there was no express prohibition on my learning anything, doing anything, or going
anywhere; and so, after this, I besought her to let me accompany her some time. But this too she refused. My
requests were often made, and as I learned more and more of the language I was able to make them with more
earnestness and effect, until at length I succeeded in overcoming her objections.

"It is for your own sake," said she, "that I have refused, Atam-or. I do not wish to lessen your happiness. But
you must know all soon; and so, if you wish to come with me and see what I have to do, why, you may come the
next jom."

This meant the next day, jom being the division of time corresponding with our day. At this promise I was so
full of gratitude that I forgot all about the dark suggestiveness of her words. The next jom I arose sooner than usual
and went forth. I found Almah waiting for me. She looked troubled, and greeted me with a mournful smile.

"You will find pain in this," said she; "but you wish it, and if you still wish it, why, I will take you with me."
At this I only persisted the more, and so we set forth. We went through the cavern passages. Few people were there; all seemed asleep. Then we went out-of-doors and came into the full blaze of that day which here knew no night, but prolonged itself into months. For a while Almah stood looking forth between the trees to where the bright sunlight sparkled on the sea, and then with a sigh she turned to the left. I followed. On coming to the next portal she went in. I followed, and found myself in a rough cavern, dark and forbidding. Traversing this we came to an inner doorway, closed with a heavy mat. This she raised, and passed through, while I went in after her.

I found myself in a vast cavern, full of dim, sparkling lights, which served not to illuminate it, but merely to indicate its enormous extent. Far above rose the vaulted roof, to a height of apparently a hundred feet. Under this there was a lofty half-pyramid with stone steps. All around, as far as I could see in the obscure light, there were niches in the walls, each one containing a figure with a light burning at its feet. I took them for statues. Almah pointed in silence to one of these which were nearest, and I went up close so as to see it.

The first glance that I took made me recoil with horror. It was no statue that I saw in that niche, but a shrivelled human form--a hideous sight. It was dark and dried; it was fixed in a sitting posture, with its hands resting on its knees, and its hollow eyes looking forward. On its head was the mockery of a wreath of flowers, while from its heart there projected the handle and half of the blade of a knife which had been thrust there. What was the meaning of this knife? It seemed to tell of a violent death. Yet the flowers must surely be a mark of honor. A violent death with honor, and the embalmed remains--these things suggested nothing else than the horrid thought of a human sacrifice. I looked away with eager and terrible curiosity. I saw all the niches, hundreds upon hundreds, all filled with these fearful occupants. I turned again with a sinking heart to Almah. Her face was full of anguish.

"This is my duty," said she. "Every jom I must come here and crown these victims with fresh flowers."

A feeling of sickening horror overwhelmed me. Almah had spoken these words and stood looking at me with a face of woe. This, then, was that daily task from which she was wont to return in such sadness--an abhorrent task to her, and one to which familiarity had never reconciled her. What was she doing here? What dark fate was it that thus bound this child of light to these children of darkness? or why was she thus compelled to perform a service from which all her nature revolted? I read in her face at this moment a horror equal to my own; and at the sight of her face of woe. This, then, was that daily task from which she was wont to return in such sadness--an abhorrent task to my own misery.

"This is no place for you," continued Almah. "Go, and I will soon join you."

"No," said I, using her language after my own broken fashion--"no, I will not go--I will stay, I will help, if you will permit."

She looked at me earnestly, and seemed to see that my resolution was firmly fixed, and that I was not to be dissuaded from it.

"Very well," said she; "if you do stay and help me, it will be a great relief."

With these simple words she proceeded to carry out her work. At the foot of the pyramid there was a heap of wreaths made out of fresh flowers, and these were to be placed by her on the heads of the embalmed corpses.

"This work," said she, "is considered here the highest and most honorable that can be performed. It is given to me out of kindness, and they cannot understand that I can have any other feelings in the performance than those of joy and exultation--here among the dead and in the dark."

I said nothing, but followed and watched her, carrying the wreaths and supplying her. She went to each niche in succession, and after taking the wreath off each corpse she placed a fresh one on, saying a brief formula at each act. By keeping her supplied with wreaths I was able to lighten her task, so much so that, whereas it usually occupied her more than two hours, on the present occasion it was finished in less than half an hour. She informed me that those which she crowned were the corpses of men who had been sacrificed during the present season--by season meaning the six months of light; and that though many more were here, yet they wore crowns of gold. At the end of ten years they were removed to public sepulchres. The number of those which had to be crowned by her was about a hundred. Her work was only to crown them, the labor of collecting the flowers and weaving the wreaths and attending to the lamps being performed by others.

I left this place with Almah, sad and depressed. She had not told me why these victims had been sacrificed, nor did I feel inclined to ask. A dark suspicion had come to me that these people, underneath all their amiable ways, concealed thoughts, habits, and motives of a frightful kind; and that beyond all my present brightness and happiness there might be a fate awaiting me too horrible for thought. Yet I did not wish to borrow trouble. What I had seen and heard was quite enough for one occasion. I was anxious, rather, to forget it all. Nor did Almah's words or manner in any way reassure me. She was silent and sad and preoccupied. It was as though she knew the worst, and knowing it, dared not speak; as though there was something more horrible which she dared not reveal. For my part, I feared it so that I dared not ask. It was enough for me just then to know that my mild and self-denying and generous entertainers were addicted to the abhorrent custom of human sacrifices.
CHAPTER X
THE SACRED HUNT

On that very morn the Kohen informed me that they were about to set forth on the "sacred hunt," an event which always occurred toward the end of the season, and he kindly invited me to go. I, eager to find any relief from the horrible thoughts that had taken possession of me, and full of longing for active exertion, at once accepted the invitation. I was delighted to hear Almah say that she too was going; and I learned at the same time that in this strange land the women were as fond of hunting as the men, and that on such occasions their presence was expected.

The sacred hunt was certainly a strange one. I saw that it was to take place on the water; for a great crowd, numbering over a hundred, went down to the harbor and embarked on a galley, on which there were a hundred others, who served as rowers. The hunters were all armed with long, light javelins and short swords. Some of these were offered to me, for as yet no one supposed that my rifle and pistol were instruments of destruction, or anything else than ornaments. My refusal to accept their weapons created some surprise, but with their usual civility they did not press their offers further. It was evident that this hunting expedition was only made in obedience to some hallowed custom; for the light of the sun pained their eyes, and all their movements were made with uncertainty and hesitation. With these a hunt by sunlight is the same as a hunt by night would be with us. There was the same confusion and awkwardness.

The Kohen was in command. At his word the galley started, and the rowers pulled out to sea with long, regular strokes. I was anxious to know what the expedition was aimed at, and what were the animals that we expected to get; but I could not make out Almah's explanations. Her words suggested something of vague terror, vast proportions, and indescribable ferocity; but my ignorance of the language prevented me from learning anything more.

We went along the coast for a few miles, and then came to the mouth of a great river, which seemed to flow from among the mountains. The current was exceedingly swift, and as I looked back it seemed to me that it must be the very stream which had borne me here into this remote world. I afterward found out that this was so—that this stream emerges from among the mountains, flowing from an unknown source. It was over this that I had been borne in my sleep, after I had emerged from the subterranean darkness, and it was by this current that I had been carried into the open sea. As we crossed the estuary of this river I saw that the shores on either side were low, and covered with the rankest vegetation; giant trees of fern, vast reeds and grasses, all arose here in a dense growth impassable to man. Upon the shallow shores the surf was breaking; and here in the tide I saw objects which I at first supposed to be rocks, but afterward found out to be living things. They looked like alligators, but were far larger than the largest alligators known to us, besides being of far more terrific aspect. Toward these the galley was directed, and I now saw with surprise that these were the objects of the sacred hunt.

Suddenly, as the galley was moving along at half-speed, there arose out of the water a thing that looked like the folds of a giant hairy serpent, which, however, proved to be the long neck of an incredible monster, whose immense body soon afterward appeared above the water. With huge fins he propelled himself toward us; and his head, twenty feet in the air, was poised as though about to attack. The head was like that of an alligator, the open jaws showed a fearful array of sharp teeth, the eyes were fiercely glowing, the long neck was covered with a coarse, shaggy mane, while the top of the body, which was out of the water, was incased in an impenetrable cuirass of bone. Such a monster as this seemed unassailable, especially by men who had no missile weapons, and whose eyes were so dim and weak. I therefore expected that the galley would turn and fly from the attack, for the monster itself seemed as large as our vessel; but there was not the slightest thought of flight. On the contrary, every man was on the alert; some sprang to the bow and stood there, awaiting the first shock; others, amidship, stood waiting for the orders of the Kohen. Meanwhile the monster approached, and at length, with a sweep of his long neck, came down upon the dense crowd at the bows. A dozen frail lances were broken against his horned head, a half-dozen wretches were seized and terribly torn by those remorseless jaws. Still none fled. All rushed forward, and with lances, axes, knives, and ropes they sought to destroy the enemy. Numbers of them strove to seize his long neck. In the ardor of the fight the rowers dropped their oars and hurried to the scene, to take part in the struggle. The slaughter was sickening, but not a man quailed. Never had I dreamed of such blind and desperate courage as was now displayed before my horror-stricken eyes. Each sought to outdo the other. They had managed to throw ropes around the monster's neck, by which he was held close to the galley. His fierce movements seemed likely to drag us all down under the water; and his long neck, free from restraint, writhed and twisted among the struggling crowd of fighting men, in the midst of whom was the Kohen, as desperate and as fearless as any.

All this had taken place in a very short space of time, and I had scarce been able to comprehend the full meaning of it all. As for Almah, she stood pale and trembling, with a face of horror. At last it seemed to me that every man of them would be destroyed, and that they were all throwing their lives away to no purpose whatever. Above all, my heart was wrung for the Kohen, who was there in the midst of his people, lifting his frail and puny
arm against the monster. I could endure inaction no longer. I had brought my arms with me, as usual; and now, as
the monster raised his head, I took aim at his eye and fired. The report rang out in thunder. Almah gave a shriek, and
amid the smoke I saw the long, snake-like neck of the monster sweeping about madly among the men. In the water
his vast tail was lashing the surface of the sea, and churning it into foam. Here I once more took aim immediately
under the fore-fin, where there was no scaly covering. Once more I fired. This time it was with fatal effect; and after
one or two convulsive movements the monster, with a low, deep bellow, let his head fall and gasped out his life.

I hurried forward. There lay the frightful head, with its long neck and shaggy mane, while all around was a
hideous spectacle. The destruction of life had been awful. Nineteen were dead, and twenty-eight were wounded,
writhing in every gradation of agony, some horribly mangled. The rest stood staring at me in astonishment, not
understanding those peals of thunder that had laid the monster low. There was no terror or awe, however--nothing
more than surprise; and the Kohen, whose clothes were torn into shreds and covered with blood, looked at me in
bewilderment. I said to him, out of my small stock of words, that the wounded ought at once to be cared for. At this
he turned away and made some remarks to his men.

I now stood ready to lend my own services, if needful. I expected to take a part in the tender attentions which
were the due of these gallant souls, who had exhibited such matchless valor; these men who thought nothing of life,
but flung it away at the command of their chief without dreaming of flight or of hesitation. Thus I stood looking on
in an expectant attitude, when there came a moment in which I was simply petrified with horror; for the Kohen drew
his knife, stooped over the wounded man nearest him, and then stabbed him to the heart with a mortal wound. The
others all proceeded to do the same, and they did it in the coolest and most business-like manner, without any
passion, without any feeling of any kind, and, indeed, with a certain air of gratification, as though they were
performing some peculiarly high and sacred duty. The mildness and benevolence of their faces seemed actually
heightened, and the perpetration of this unutterable atrocity seemed to affect these people in the same way in which
the performance of acts of humanity might affect us.

For my own part, I stood for a few moments actually motionless from perplexity and horror; then, with a
shriek, I rushed forward as if to prevent it; but I was too late. The unutterable deed was done, and the unfortunate
wounded, without an exception, lay dead beside their slain companions. As for myself, I was only regarded with
fresh wonder, and they all stood blinking at me with their half-closed eyes. Suddenly the Kohen fell prostrate on his
knees before me, and bowing his head handed me his bloody knife.

"Atam-or," said he, "give me also the blessing of darkness and death!"

At these strange words, following such actions, I could say nothing. I was more bewildered than ever, and
horror and bewilderment made me dumb. I turned away and went aft to Almah, who had seen it all. She looked at
me with an anxious gaze, as if to learn what the effect of all this had been on me. I could not speak a word, but with
a vague sense of the necessity of self-preservation, I loaded my rifle, and tried in vain to make out what might be the
meaning of this union of gentleness and kindness with atrocious cruelty. Meanwhile, the men all went to work upon
various tasks. Some secured lines about the monster so as to tow it astern; others busied themselves with the corpses,
collecting them and arranging them in rows. At length we returned, towing the monster astern.

I could not speak until I was back again in the lighted rooms and alone with Almah; then I told her, as well as I
could, the horror that I felt.

"It was honor to those brave men," said she.

"Honor!" said I. "What! to kill them?"

"Yes," said she; "it is so with these people; with them death is the highest blessing. They all love death and seek
after it. To die for another is immortal glory. To kill the wounded was to show that they had died for others. The
wounded wished it themselves. You saw how they all sought after death. These people were too generous and kind-
hearted to refuse to kill them after they had received wounds."

At this my perplexity grew deeper than ever, for such an explanation as this only served to make the mystery
greater.

"Here," said she, "no one understands what it is to fear death. They all love it and long for it; but everyone
wishes above all to die for others. This is their highest blessing. To die a natural death in bed is avoided if possible."

All this was incomprehensible.

"Tell me, Almah," I said--"you hate darkness as I do--do you not fear death?"

"I fear it above all things," said Almah. "To me it is the horror of life; it is the chief of terrors."

"So it is with me," said I. "In my country we call death the King of Terrors."

"Here," said Almah, "they call death the Lord of Joy."

Not long after, the Kohen came in, looking as quiet, as gentle, and as amiable as ever. He showed some
curiosity about my rifle, which he called a sepet-ram, or "rod of thunder." Almah also showed curiosity. I did not
care to explain the process of loading it to the Kohen, though Almah had seen me load it in the galley, and I left him
to suppose that it was used in some mysterious way. I cautioned him not to handle it carelessly, but found that this caution only made him the more eager to handle it, since the prospect of an accident found an irresistible attraction. I would not let it go out of my own hands, however; and the Kohen, whose self-denial was always most wonderful to me, at once checked his curiosity.

CHAPTER XI
THE SWAMP MONSTER

A few joms after, I was informed by the Kohen that there was to be another sacred hunt. At first I felt inclined to refuse, but on learning that Almah was going, I resolved to go also; for Almah, though generally mistress of her actions, had nevertheless certain duties to perform, and among these was the necessity of accompanying hunting-parties. I did not yet understand her position here, nor had I heard from her yet how it was that she was so different from the rest of them. That was all to be learned at a future time. For the present I had to be satisfied with knowing that she belonged to a different nation, who spoke a different language, and that all her thoughts and feelings were totally different from those of the people among whom she was living. She loved the light, she feared death, and she had never been able in the slightest degree to reconcile herself to the habits of these people. This I could readily understand, for to me it seemed as though they lived in opposition to nature itself.

We went out into the daylight, and then I saw a sight which filled me with amazement. I saw a flock of birds larger than even the opakus. They were called "opmahera." They seemed as tall as giraffes, and their long legs indicated great powers of running. Their wings were very short, and not adapted for flight. They were very tractable, and were harnessed for riding in a peculiar way; lines like reins were fastened to the wings, and the driver, who sat close by the neck, guided the bird in this way. Each bird carried two men, but for Almah and me there was a bird apiece. An iron prod was also taken by each driver as a spur. I did not find out until afterward how to drive. At that time the prospect of so novel a ride was such an exciting one that I forgot everything else. The birds seemed quiet and docile. I took it for granted that mine was well trained, and would go with the others of his own accord. We all mounted by means of a stone platform which stood by the pyramid, and soon were on our way.

The speed was amazing; the fastest race-horse at home is slow compared with this. It was as swift as an ordinary railway train, if not more so. For some minutes the novelty of my situation took away all other thoughts, and I held the reins in my hands without knowing how to use them. But this mattered not, for the well-trained bird kept on after the others, while Almah on her bird was close behind me. The pace, as I said, was tremendous, yet no easier motion can be imagined. The bird bounded along with immense leaps, with wings outstretched, but its feet touched the ground so lightly that the motion seemed almost equal to flying. We did not confine ourselves to the roads, for the birds were capable of going over any kind of country in a straight line. On this occasion we passed over wide fields and rocky mountain ridges and deep swamps and sand wastes at the same speed, until at length we reached a vast forest of dense tree-ferns, where the whole band stopped for a short time, after which we took up a new direction, moving on more slowly. The forest grew up out of a swamp, which extended as far as the eye could reach from the sea to the mountains. Along the edge of this forest we went for some time, until at length there came a rushing, crackling sound, as of something moving there among the trees, crushing down everything in its progress. We halted, and did not have to wait long; for soon, not far away, there emerged from the thick forest a figure of incredible size and most hideous aspect.

It looked like one of those fabled dragons such as may be seen in pictures, but without wings. It was nearly a hundred feet in length, with a stout body and a long tail, covered all over with impenetrable scales. Its hind-legs were rather longer than its fore-legs, and it moved its huge body with ease and rapidity. Its feet were armed with formidable claws. But its head was most terrific. It was a vast mass of bone, with enormous eyes that glared like fire; its jaws opened to the width of six or eight feet, and were furnished with rows of sharp teeth, while at the extremity of its nose there was a tusk several feet long, like the horn of a rhinoceros, curving backward. All this I took in at the first glance, and the next instant the whole band of hunters, with their usual recklessness, flung themselves upon the monster.

For a short time all was the wildest confusion—an intermingling of birds and men, with the writhing and roaring beast. With his huge claws and his curved horn and his wide jaws he dealt death and destruction all around; yet still the assailants kept at their work. Many leaped down to the ground and rushed close up to the monster, thrusting their lances into the softer and more unprotected parts of his body; while others, guiding their birds with marvellous dexterity, assailed him on all sides. The birds, too, were kept well to their work; nor did they exhibit any fear. It was not until they were wounded that they sought to fly. Still, the contest seemed too unequal. The sacrifice of life was horrible. I saw men and birds literally torn to pieces before my eyes. Nevertheless, the utter fearlessness of the assailants confounded me. In spite of the slaughter, fresh crowds rushed on. They clambered over his back, and strove to drive their lances under his bony cuirass. In the midst of them I saw the Kohen. By some means he had reached the animal's back, and was crawling along, holding by the coarse shaggy mane. At length he stopped, and
with a sudden effort thrust his lance into the monster's eye. The vast beast gave a low and terrible howl; his immense tail went flying all about; in his pain he rolled over and over, crushing underneath him in his awful struggles all who were nearest. I could no longer be inactive. I raised my rifle, and as the beast in his writhings exposed his belly I took aim at the soft flesh just inside his left fore-leg, and fired both barrels.

At that instant my bird gave a wild, shrill scream and a vast bound into the air, and then away it went like the wind--away, I know not where. That first bound had nearly jerked me off; but I managed to avoid this and now instinctively clung with all my might to the bird's neck, still holding my rifle. The speed of the bird was twice as great as it had been before--as the speed of a runaway horse surpasses that of the same horse when trotting at his ordinary rate and under control. I could scarcely make out where I was going. Rocks, hills, swamps, fields, trees, sand, and sea all seemed to flash past in one confused assemblage, and the only thought in my mind was that I was being carried to some remote wilderness, to be flung there bruised and maimed among the rocks, to perish helplessly. Every moment I expected to be thrown, for the progress of the bird was not only inconceivably swift, but it also gave immense leaps into the air; and it was only its easy mode of lighting on the ground after each leap that saved me from being hurled off. As it was, however, I clung instinctively to the bird's neck, until at last it came to a stop so suddenly that my hands slipped, and I fell to the ground.

I was senseless for I know not how long. When at last I revived I found myself propped up against a bank, and Almah bathing my head with cold water. Fortunately, I had received no hurt. In falling I had struck on my head, but it was against the soft turf, and though I was stunned, yet on regaining my senses no further inconvenience was experienced. The presence of Almah was soon explained. The report of the rifle had startled her bird also, which had bounded away in terror like mine; but Almah understood how to guide him, and managed to keep him after me, so as to be of assistance in case of need. She had been close behind all the time, and had stopped when I fell, and came to my assistance.

The place was a slope looking out upon an arm of the sea, and apparently remote from human abode. The scenery was exquisitely beautiful. A little distance off we saw the edge of the forest; the open country was dotted with clumps of trees; on the other side of the arm of the sea was an easy declivity covered with trees of luxuriant foliage and vast dimensions; farther away on one side rose the icy summits of impassable mountains; on the other side there extended the blue expanse of the boundless sea. The spot where I lay was over-shadowed by the dense foliage of a tree which was unlike anything that I had ever seen, and seemed like some exaggerated grass; at our feet a brook ran murmuring to the shore; in the air and all around were innumerable birds.

The situation in which I found myself seemed inexpressibly sweet, and all the more so from the gentle face of Almah. Would it not be well, I thought, to remain here? Why should Almah go back to her repulsive duties? Why should we return to those children of blood, who loved death and darkness? Here we might pass our days together unmolested. The genial climate would afford us warmth; we needed no shelter except the trees, and as for food, there were the birds of the air in innumerable flocks.

"Are there no caverns here?"

"Oh no. This country has no inhabitants. It is full of fierce wild beasts. We should be destroyed before one jom."

"But must we go back?" said I. "You have a country. Where is it? See, here are these birds. They are swift. They can carry us anywhere. Come, let us fly, and you can return to your own country."

Almah shook her head. "These birds," said she, "cannot go over the sea, or through these endless forests. My country can only be reached by sea."

"Can we not hurry back, seize a boat, and go? I know how to sail over the water without oars."

"We certainly might leave the country; but there is another difficulty. The dark season is coming, and we should never be able to find our way. Besides, the sea is full of monsters, and you and I would perish."

"At any rate, let us try. I have my sepet-ram."

"We could never find our way."

"Only tell me," said I, "where it lies, and I will go by the stars."

"The trouble is," said she, "that even if we did succeed in reaching my land, I should be sent back again; for I was sent here as a sacred hostage, and I have been here four seasons."

But in the midst of this conversation a sound arrested our attention--heavy, puffing, snorting sound, as of some living thing. Hastily I started up, rifle in hand, and looked; and as I looked I felt my nerves thrill with horror. There, close by the shore, I saw a vast form--a living thing--full sixty feet in length. It had a body like that of an elephant, the head of a crocodile, and enormous glaring eyes. Its immense body was covered with impenetrable armor, and was supported on legs long enough to allow it to run with great speed. It differed in many respects from the monster..."
of the swamp—the legs being longer, the tail shorter and thinner, and its head and jaws larger and longer. I shrank back, thinking of seizing Almah and hiding. But I saw that she had already taken the alarm, and with more presence of mind than I had she had hurried to the birds, who were standing near, and had made them lie down. As I turned, she beckoned to me without a word. I hurried to her. She told me to mount. I did so at once; she did the same. Scarce had we mounted than the monster perceived us, and with a terrible bellow came rushing toward us. Almah drove her goad deep into her bird, which at once rose and went off like the wind, and mine started to follow. The vast monster came on. His roar sounded close behind, and I heard the clash of his tremendous jaws; but the swift bird with a bound snatched me from his grasp, and bore me far away out of his reach. Away I went like the wind. Almah was ahead, looking back from time to time, and waving her hand joyously. So we went on, returning on our course at a speed almost as great as that with which we had come. By this time the novelty had in part worn away, and the easy motion gave me confidence. I noticed that we were travelling a wild, uninhabited, and rocky district by the sea-side. Before me the country spread far away, interspersed with groves, terminating in forests, and bounded in the far distance by mountains. The country here was so rough that it seemed as if nothing could pass over it except such creatures as these—the opmaheras.

At length we arrived at the spot which we had left—the scene of the hunt. We could see it from afar, for the opmaheras stood quietly around, and the men were busy elsewhere. As we drew nearer I saw the vast body of the monster. They had succeeded in killing it, yet—oh heavens, at what a cost! One half of all the party lay dead. The rest were unharmed, and among these was the Kohen. He greeted me with a melancholy smile. That melancholy smile, however, was not caused by the sad fate of his brave companions, but, as I afterward learned, simply and solely because he himself had not gained his death. When I saw that there were no wounded, a dark suspicion came over me that the wounded had again been put to death. I did not care to ask. The truth was too terrible to hear, and I felt glad that accident had drawn me away. It was all a dark and dreadful mystery. These people were the most gentle, the most self-sacrificing, and the most generous in the world; yet their strange and unnatural love of death made them capable of endless atrocities. Life and light seemed to them as actual evils, and death and darkness the only things worthy of regard.

Almah told me that they were going to bring the monster home, and had sent for oppokus to drag it along. The dead were also to be fetched back. There was no further necessity for us to remain, and so we returned at once.

On the way, Almah said, "Do not use the sepet-ram again. You can do no good with it. You must not make it common. Keep it. The time may come when you will need it: you are not fond of death."

I shuddered.

"Never forget," she said, "that here death is considered the chief blessing. It is useless for you to interfere in their ways. You cannot change them."

Some more joms passed. The bodies were embalmed, and Almah had more victims to crown with garlands in the horrible cheder nebilin.

CHAPTER XII
THE BALEFUL SACRIFICE

I resolved to go on no more sacred hunts. I was sickened at the horrible cruelty, the needless slaughter, the mad self-sacrifice which distinguished them. I was overwhelmed with horror at the merciless destruction of brave comrades, whose wounds, so gallantly received, should have been enough to inspire pity even in a heart of stone. The gentleness, the incessant kindness, the matchless generosity of these people seemed all a mockery. What availed it all when the same hand that heaped favors upon me, the guest, could deal death without compunction upon friends and relatives? It seemed quite possible for the Kohen to kill his own child, or cut the throat of his wife, if the humor seized him. And how long could I hope to be spared among a people who had this insane thirst for blood?

Some more joms had passed, and the light season had almost ended. The sun had been sinking lower and lower. The time had at last come when only a portion of his disk would be visible for a little while above the hills, and then he would be seen no more for six months of our time. This was the dark season, and, as I had already learned, its advent was always hailed with joy and celebrated with solemn services, for the dark season freed them from their long confinement, permitted them to go abroad, to travel by sea and land, to carry on their great works, to indulge in all their most important labors and favorite amusements. The Kohen asked me to be present at the great festival, and I gladly consented. There seemed to be nothing in this that could be repellent. As I was anxious to witness some of their purely religious ceremonies, I wished to go. When I told Almah, she looked sad, but said nothing. I wondered at this, and asked her if she was going. She informed me that she would have to go, whereupon I assured her that this was an additional reason why I should go.

I went with Almah. The Kohen attended us with his usual kind and gracious consideration. It seemed almost as though he was our servant. He took us to a place where we could be seated, although all the others were standing. Almah wished to refuse, but I prevailed upon her to sit down, and she did so.
The scene was upon the semicircular terrace in front of the cavern, and we were seated upon a stone platform beside the chief portal. A vast crowd was gathered in front. Before us arose the half-pyramid of which I have already spoken. The light was faint. It came from the disk of the sun, which was partly visible over the icy crest of the distant mountains. Far away the sea was visible, rising high over the tops of the trees, while overhead the brighter stars were plainly discernible.

The Kohen ascended the pyramid, and others followed. At the base there was a crowd of men, with emaciated forms and faces, and coarse, squalid attire, who looked like the most abject paupers, and seemed the lowest in the land. As the Kohen reached the summit there arose a strange sound—a mournful, plaintive chant, which seemed to be sung chiefly by the paupers at the base of the pyramid. The words of this chant I could not make out, but the melancholy strain affected me in spite of myself. There was no particular tune, and nothing like harmony; but the effect of so many voices uniting in this strain was very powerful and altogether indescribable. In the midst of this I saw the crowd parting asunder so as to make way for something; and through the passage thus formed I saw a number of youths in long robes, who advanced to the pyramid, singing as they went. Then they ascended the steps, two by two, still singing, and at length reached the summit, where they arranged themselves in order. There were thirty of them and they arranged themselves in three rows of ten each, and as they stood they never ceased to sing, while the paupers below joined in the strain.

And now the sun was almost hidden, and there was only the faintest line from the upper edge of his disk perceptible over the icy mountain-tops. The light was a softened twilight glow. It was to be the last sight of the sun for six months, and this was the spectacle upon which he threw his parting beam. So the sun passed away, and then there came the beginning of the long dark season. At first, however, there was rather twilight than darkness, and this twilight continued long. All this only served to heighten the effect of this striking scene; and as the light faded away, I looked with increasing curiosity upon the group at the top of the pyramid. Almah was silent. I half turned, and said something to her about the beauty of the view. She said nothing, but looked at me with such an expression that I was filled with amazement. I saw in her face something like a dreadful anticipation—something that spoke of coming evil. The feeling was communicated to me, and I turned my eyes back to the group on the pyramid with vague fears in my soul.

Those fears were but too well founded, for now the dread ceremony began. The Kohen drew his knife, and placed himself at the head of the stone table. One of the youths came forward, stepped upon it, and lay down on his back with his head toward the Kohen. The mournful chant still went on. Then the Kohen raised his knife and plunged it into the heart of the youth. I sat for a moment rooted to the spot; then a groan burst from me in spite of myself. Almah caught my hands in hers, which were as cold as ice.

"Be firm," she said, "or we are both lost. Be firm, Atam-or!"

"I must go," said I, and I tried to rise.

"Don't move," she said, "for your life! We are lost if you move. Keep still—restrain yourself—shut your eyes."

I tried to do so, but could not. There was a horrible fascination about the scene which forced me to look and see all. The Kohen took the victim, and drawing it from the altar, threw it over the precipice to the ground beneath. Then a loud shout burst forth from the great crowd. "Sibgu Sibgin! Ranenu! Hodu lecosck!" which means, "Sacrifice the victims! Rejoice! Give thanks to darkness!"

Then another of the youths went forward amid the singing, and laid himself down to meet the same fate; and again the corpse was flung from the top of the pyramid, and again the shout arose. All the others came forward in the same manner. Oh, horrible, horrible, thrice horrible spectacle! I do not remember how I endured it. I sat there with Almah, trying to restrain myself as she had entreated me, more for her sake than for my own, a prey to every feeling of horror, anguish, and despair. How it all ended I do not know, nor do I know how I got away from the place; for I only remember coming back to my senses in the lighted grotto, with Almah bending anxiously over me.

After this there remained a dark mystery and an ever-present horror. I found myself among a people who were at once the gentlest of the human race and the most blood-thirsty—the kindest and the most cruel. This mild, amiable, and self-sacrificing Kohen, how was it possible that he should transform himself to a fiend incarnate? And for me and for Almah, what possible hope could there be? What fate might they have in reserve for us? Of what avail was all this profound respect, this incessant desire to please, this attention to our slightest wish, this comfort and luxury and splendor, this freedom of speech and action? Was it anything better than a mockery? Might it not be the shallow kindness of the priest to the victim reserved for the sacrifice? Was it, after all, in any degree better than the kindness of the cannibal savages on those drear outer shores who received us with such hospitality, but only that they might destroy us at last? Might they not all belong to the same race, dwelling as they did in caverns, shunning the sunlight, and blending kindness with cruelty? It was an awful thought!

Yet I had one consolation. Almah was with me, and so long as she was spared to me I could endure this life. I tried for her sake to resist the feelings that were coming over me. I saw that she too was a prey to ever-deepening
saddness. She felt as I did, and this despair of soul might wreck her young life if there were no alleviation. And so I sought to alleviate her distress and to banish her sadness. The songs of these people had much impressed me; and one day, as I talked about this with Almah, she brought forth a musical instrument of peculiar shape, which was not unlike a guitar, though the shape was square and there were a dozen strings. Upon this she played, singing at the same time some songs of a plaintive character. An idea now occurred to me to have an instrument made according to my own plans, which should be nothing less than a violin. Almah was delighted at the proposal, and at once found a very clever workman, who under my direction succeeded in producing one which served my purpose well. I was a good violinist, and in this I was able to find solace for myself and for Almah for many a long hour.

The first time that I played was memorable. As the tones floated through the air they caught the ears of those outside, and soon great numbers came into the apartment, listening in amazement and in rapt attention. Even the painful light was disregarded in the pleasure of this most novel sensation, and I perceived that if the sense of sight was deficient among them, that of hearing was sufficiently acute. I played many times, and sometimes sang from among the songs of different nations; but those which these people liked best were the Irish and Scottish melodies—those matchless strains created by the genius of the Celtic race, and handed down from immemorial ages through long generations. In these there was nothing artificial, nothing transient. They were the utterance of the human heart, and in them there was that touch of nature which makes all men kin. These were the immortal passions which shall never cease to affect the soul of man, and which had power even here; the strains of love, of sadness, and of pathos were sweet and enticing to this gentle race; for in their mild manners and their outburst of cruelty they seemed to be not unlike the very race which had created this music, since the Celt is at once gentle and blood-thirsty.

I played "Tara," "Bonnie Doon," "The Last Rose of Summer," "The Land of the Leaf," "Auld Lang Syne," "Lochaber." They stood entranced, listening with all their souls. They seemed to hunger and thirst after this music, and the strains of the inspired Celtic race seemed to come to them like the revelation of the glory of heaven. Then I played more lively airs. Some I played a second time, singing the words. They seemed eager to have the same one played often. At last a grisly thought came to me: it was that they would learn these sweet strains, and put their own words to them so as to use them at the awful sacrifices. After that I would play no more.

It is a land of tender love and remorseless cruelty. Music is all-powerful to awaken the one, but powerless to abate the other; and the eyes that weep over the pathetic strains of "Lochaber" can gaze without a tear upon the death-agonies of a slaughtered friend.

CHAPTER XIII
THE AWFUL "MISTA KOSEK"

The terrible sacrifice marked the end of the light season. The dark season had now begun, which would last for half the coming year. No more sunlight would now be visible, save at first for a few joms, when at certain times the glare would be seen shooting up above the icy crests of the mountains. Now the people all moved out of the caverns into the stone houses on the opposite side of the terraces, and the busy throng transferred themselves and their occupations to the open air. This with them was the season of activity, when all their most important affairs were undertaken and carried out; the season, too, of enjoyment, when all the chief sports and festivals took place. Then the outer world all awoke to life; the streets were thronged, fleets of galleys came forth from their moorings, and the sounds of labor and of pleasure, of toil and revelry, arose into the darkened skies. Then the city was a city of the living, no longer silent, but full of bustle, and the caverns were frequented but little. This cavern life was only tolerable during the light season, when the sun-glare was over the land; but now, when the beneficent and grateful darkness pervaded all things, the outer world was infinitely more agreeable.

To me, however, the arrival of the dark season brought only additional gloom. I could not get rid of the thought that I was reserved for some horrible fate, in which Almah might also be involved. We were both aliens here, in a nation of kind-hearted and amiable miscreants—of generous, refined, and most self-denying friends; of men who were highly civilized, yet utterly wrong-headed and irreclaimable in their blood-thirsty cruelty. The stain of blood-guiltiness was over all the land. What was I, that I could hope to be spared? The hope was madness, and I did not pretend to indulge it.

The only consolation was Almah. The manners of these people were such that we were still left as unconstrained as ever in our movements, and always, wherever we went, we encountered nothing but amiable smiles and courteous offices. Everyone was always eager to do anything for us—to give, to go, to act, to speak, as though we were the most honored of guests, the pride of the city. The Kohen was untiring in his efforts to please. He was in the habit of making presents every time he came to see me, and on each occasion the present was of a different kind; at one time it was a new robe of curiously wrought feathers, at another some beautiful gem, at another some rare fruit. He also made incessant efforts to render my situation pleasant, and was delighted at my rapid progress in acquiring the language.

On the jom following the sacrifice I accompanied Almah as she went to her daily task, and after it was over I
asked when the new victims would be placed here. "How long does it take to embalm them?" I added.

Almah looked at me earnestly. "They will not bring them here; they will not embalm them," said she.

"Why not?" I asked; "what will they do with them?"

"Do not ask," said she. "It will pain you to know."

In spite of repeated solicitation she refused to give me any satisfaction. I felt deeply moved at her words and her looks. What was it, I wondered, that could give me pain? or what could there still be that could excite fear in me, who had learned and seen so much? I could not imagine. It was evidently some disposal of the bodies of the victims-that was plain. Turning this over in my mind, with vague conjectures as to Almah's meaning, I left her and walked along the terrace until I came to the next cavern. This had never been open before, and I now entered through curiosity to see what it might be. I saw a vast cavern, quite as large as the cheder nebilin, full of people, who seemed to be engaged in decorating it. Hundreds were at work, and they had brought immense tree-ferns, which were placed on either side in long rows, with their branches meeting and interlacing at the top. It looked like the interior of some great Gothic cathedral at night, and the few twinkling lights that were scattered here and there made the shadowy outline just visible to me.

I asked one of the bystanders what this might be, and he told me that it was the Mista Kosek, which means the "Feast of Darkness," from which I gathered that they were about to celebrate the advent of the dark season with a feast. From what I knew of their character this seemed quite intelligible, and there was much beauty and taste in the arrangements. All were industrious and orderly, and each one seemed most eager to assist his neighbor. Indeed, there seemed to be a friendly rivalry in this which at times amounted to positive violence; for more than once when a man was seen carrying too large a burden, someone else would insist on taking it from him. At first these altercations seemed exactly like the quarrels of workmen at home, but a closer inspection showed that it was merely the persistent effort of one to help another.

I learned that the feast was to take place as soon as the hall was decorated, and that it would be attended by a great multitude. I felt a great interest in it. There seemed something of poetic beauty in this mode of welcoming the advent of a welcome season, and it served to mitigate the horrible remembrance of that other celebration, upon which I could not think without a shudder. I thought that it would be pleasant to join with them here, and resolved to ask Almah to come with me, so that she might explain the meaning of the ceremonies. Full of this thought, I went to her and told her my wish. She looked at me with a face full of amazement and misery. In great surprise I questioned her eagerly.

"Ask me nothing," said she. "I will answer nothing; but do not think of it. Do not go near it. Stay in your room till the fearful repast is over."

"Fearful? How is it fearful?" I asked.

"Everything here is fearful," said Almah, with a sigh. "Every season it grows worse, and I shall grow at length to hate life and love death as these people do. They can never understand us, and we can never understand them. Oh, if I could but once more stand in my own dear native land but for one moment—to see once more the scenes and the faces that I love so well! Oh, how different is this land from mine! Here all is dark, all is terrible. There the people love the light and rejoice in the glorious sun, and when the dark season comes they wait, and have no other desire than long day. There we live under the sky, in the eye of the sun. We build our houses, and when the dark season comes we fill them with lamps that make a blaze like the sun itself."

"We must try to escape," I said, in a low voice.

"Escape!" said she. "That is easy enough. We might go now; but where?"

"Back," said I, "to your own country. See, the sky is dotted with stars: I can find my way by them."

"Yes," said she, "if I could only tell you where to go; but I cannot. My country lies somewhere over the sea, but where, I know not. Over the sea there are many lands, and we might reach one even worse than this."

"Perhaps," said I, "the Kohen might allow us to go away to your country, and send us there. He is most generous and most amiable. He seems to spend most of his time in efforts to make us happy. There must be many seamen in this nation who know the way. It would be worth trying."

Almah shook her head. "You do not understand these people," said she. "Their ruling passion is the hatred of self, and therefore they are eager to confer benefits on others. The only hope of life that I have for you and for myself is in this, that if they kill us they will lose their most agreeable occupation. They value us most highly, because we take everything that is given us. You and I now possess as our own property all this city and all its buildings, and all the people have made themselves our slaves."

At this I was utterly bewildered.

"I don't understand," said I.

"I suppose not," said Almah; "but you will understand better after you have been here longer. At any rate, you can see for yourself that the ruling passion here is self-denial and the good of others. Everyone is intent upon this,
from the Kohen up to the most squalid pauper."

"Up to the most squalid pauper?" said I. "I do not understand you. You mean down to the most squalid pauper."

"No," said Almah; "I mean what I say. In this country the paupers form the most honored and envied class."

"This is beyond my comprehension," said I. "But if this is really so, and if these people pretend to be our slaves, why may we not order out a galley and go?"

"Oh, well, with you in your land, if a master were to order his slaves to cut his throat and poison his children and burn his house, would the slaves obey?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, our slaves here would not--in fact could not--obey a command that would be shocking to their natures. They think that we are in the best of all lands, and my request to be sent home would be utterly monstrous."

"I suppose," said I, "they would kill us if we asked them to do so?"

"Yes," said Almah; "for they think death the greatest blessing."

"And if at the point of death we should beg for life, would they spare us?"

"Certainly not," said Almah. "Would you kill a man who asked for death? No more would these people spare a man who asked for life."

All this was so utterly incomprehensible that I could pursue the subject no further. I saw, however, that Almah was wretched, dejected, and suffering greatly from homesickness. Gladly would I have taken her and started off on a desperate flight by sea or land--gladly would I have dared every peril, although I well knew what tremendous perils there were; but she would not consent, and believed the attempt to be useless. I could only wait, therefore, and indulge the hope that at last a chance of escape might one day come, of which she would be willing to avail herself.

Almah utterly refused to go to the feast, and entreated me not to go; but this only served to increase my curiosity, and I determined to see it for myself, whatever it was. She had seen it, and why should not I? Whatever it might be, my nerves could surely stand the shock as well as hers. Besides, I was anxious to know the very worst; and if there was anything that could surpass in atrocity what I had already witnessed, it were better that I should not remain in ignorance of it.

So at length, leaving Almah, I returned to the hall of the feast. I found there a vast multitude, which seemed to comprise the whole city--men, women, children, all were there. Long tables were laid out. The people were all standing and waiting. A choir was singing plaintive strains that sounded like the chant of the sacrifice. Those nearest me regarded me with their usual amiable smiles, and wished to conduct me to some place of honor; but I did not care about taking part in this feast. I wished to be a mere spectator, nothing more. I walked past and came to the next cavern. This seemed to be quite as large as the other. There was a crowd of people here also, and at one end there blazed an enormous fire. It was a furnace that seemed to be used for cooking the food of this banquet, and there was a thick steam rising from an immense cauldron, while the air was filled with an odor like that of a kitchen.

All this I took in at a glance, and at the same instant I saw something else. There were several very long tables, which stood at the sides of the cavern and in the middle, and upon each of these I saw lying certain things covered over with cloths. The shape of these was more than suggestive--it told me all. It was a sight of horror--awful, tremendous, unspeakable! For a moment I stood motionless staring; then all the cavern seemed to swim around me. I reeled, I fell, and sank into nothingness.

When I revived I was in the lighted grotto, lying on a couch, with Almah bending over me. Her face was full of tenderest anxiety, yet there was also apparent a certain solemn gloom that well accorded with my own feelings. As I looked at her she drew a long breath, and buried her face in her hands.

After a time my recollection returned, and all came back to me. I rose to a sitting posture.

"Do not rise yet," said Almah, anxiously; "you are weak."

"No," said I; "I am as strong as ever; but I'm afraid that you are weaker."

Almah shuddered.

"If you had told me exactly what it was, I would not have gone."

"I could not tell you," said she. "It is too terrible to name. Even the thought is intolerable. I told you not to go. Why did you go?"

She spoke in accents of tender reproach, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I did not think of anything so hideous as that," said I. "I thought that there might be a sacrifice, but nothing worse."

I now learned that when I fainted I had been raised most tenderly, and the Kohen himself came with me as I was carried back, and he thought that Almah would be my most agreeable nurse. The Kohen was most kind and sympathetic, and all the people vied with one another in their efforts to assist me--so much so that there was the greatest confusion. It was only by Almah's express entreaty that they retired and left me with her.

Here was a new phase in the character of this mysterious people. Could I ever hope to understand them? Where
other people are cruel to strangers, or at best indifferent, these are eager in their acts of kindness; they exhibit the most unbounded hospitality, the most lavish generosity, the most self-denying care and attention; where others would be offended at the intrusion of a stranger, and enraged at his unconquerable disgust, these people had no feeling save pity, sympathy, and a desire to alleviate his distress. And yet--oh, and yet!--oh, thought of horror!--what was this that I had seen? The abhorrent savages in the outer wilderness were surely of the same race as these. They too received us kindly, they too lavished upon us their hospitality, and yet there followed the horror of that frightful repast. Here there had been kindness and generosity and affectionate attention, to be succeeded by deeds without a name. Ah me! what an hour that was! And yet it was as nothing compared to what lay before me in the future.

But the subject was one of which I dared not speak--one from which I had to force my thoughts away. I took the violin and played "Lochaber" till Almah wept, and I had to put it away. Then I begged her to play or sing. She brought an instrument like a lute, and upon this she played some melancholy strains. At length the Kohen came in. His mild, benevolent face never exhibited more gentle and affectionate sympathy than now. He seated himself, and with eyes half closed, as usual, talked much; and yet, with a native delicacy which always distinguished this extraordinary man, he made no allusion to the awful Mista Kosek. For my own part, I could not speak. I was absent-minded, overwhelmed with gloom and despair, and at the same time full of aversion toward him and all his race. One question, however, I had to put.

"Who were the victims of the Mista Kosek?"
"They?" said he, with an agreeable smile. "Oh, they were the victims of the sacrifice."
I sank back in my seat, and said no more. The Kohen then took Almah's lute, played and sang in a very sweet voice, and at length, with his usual consideration, seeing that I looked weary, he retired.

CHAPTER XIV
I LEARN MY DOOM

Horror is a feeling that cannot last long; human nature is incapable of supporting it. Sadness, whether from bereavement, or disappointment, or misfortune of any kind, may linger on through life. In my case, however, the milder and more enduring feeling of sadness had no sufficient cause for existence. The sights which I had seen inspired horror, and horror only. But when the first rush of this feeling had passed there came a reaction. Calmness followed, and then all the circumstances of my life here conspired to perpetuate that calm. For here all on the surface was pleasant and beautiful; all the people were amiable and courteous and most generous. I had light and luxury and amusements. Around me there were thousands of faces, all greeting me with cordial affection, and thousands of hands all ready to perform my slightest wish. Above all, there was Almah. Everything combined to make her most dear to me. My life had been such that I never before had seen anyone whom I loved; and here Almah was the one congenial associate in a whole world of aliens: she was beautiful and gentle and sympathetic, and I loved her dearly, even before I understood what my feelings were. One day I learned all, and found that she was more precious to me than all the world.

It was one jom when she did not make her appearance as usual. On asking after her I learned that she was ill. At this intelligence there came over me a feeling of sickening anxiety and fear. Almah ill! What if it should prove serious? Could I endure life here without her sweet companionship? Of what value was life without her? And as I asked myself these questions I learned that Almah had become dearer to me than life itself, and that in her was all the sunshine of my existence. While she was absent, life was nothing; all its value, all its light, its flavor, its beauty, were gone. I felt utterly crushed. I forgot all else save her illness, and all that I had endured seemed as nothing when compared with this.

In the midst of my own anxiety I was surprised to find that the whole community was most profoundly agitated. Among all classes there seemed to be but one thought--her illness. I could overhear them talking I could see them wait outside to hear about her. It seemed to be the one subject of interest, beside which all others were forgotten. The Kohen was absorbed in her case; all the physicians of the city were more or less engaged in her behalf; and there came forward as volunteers every woman in the place who had any knowledge of sick-duties. I was somewhat perplexed, however, at their manner. They were certainly agitated and intensely interested, yet not exactly sad. Indeed, from what I heard it seemed as though this strange people regarded sickness as rather a blessing than otherwise. This, however, did not interfere in the slightest degree with the most intense interest in her, and the most assiduous attention. The Kohen in particular was devoted to her. He was absent-minded, silent, and full of care. On the whole, I felt more than ever puzzled, and less able than ever to understand these people. I loved them, yet loathed them; for the Kohen I had at once affection and horror. He looked like an anxious father, full of tenderest love for a sick child--full also of delicate sympathy with me; and yet I knew all the time that he was quite capable of plunging the sacrificial knife in Almah's heart and of eating her afterward.

But my own thoughts were all of Almah. I learned how dear she was. With her the brightness of life had passed; without her existence would be intolerable. Her sweet voice, her tender and gracious manner, her soft touch,
her tender, affectionate smile, her mournful yet trustful look—oh, heavens! would all these be mine no more? I could not endure the thought. At first I wandered about, seeking rest and finding none; and at length I sat in my own room, and passed the time in listening, in questioning the attendants, in wondering what I should do if she should be taken from me.

At length on one blessed jom, the Kohen came to me with a bright smile.

"Our darling Almah is better," said he. "Eat, I beseech you. She is very dear to all of us, and we have all felt for her and for you. But now all danger is past. The physicians say that she will soon be well." There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. It may have been caused by the bright light, but I attributed this to his loving heart, and I forgot that he was a cannibal. I took his hands in mine and pressed them in deep emotion. He looked at me with a sweet and gentle smile.

"I see it all," said he, in a low voice—"you love her, Atam-or."

I pressed his hands harder, but said nothing. Indeed, I could not trust myself to speak.

"I knew it," said he; "it is but natural. You are both of a different race from us; you are both much alike, and in full sympathy with one another. This draws you together. When I first saw you I thought that you would be a fit companion for her here—that you would lessen her gloom, and that she would be pleasant to you. I found out soon that I was right, and I felt glad, for you at once showed the fullest sympathy with one another. Never till you came was Almah happy with us; but since you have come she has been a different being, and there has been a joyousness in her manner that I never saw before. You have made her forget how to weep; and as for yourself, I hope she has made your life in this strange land seem less painful, Atam-or."

At all this I was so full of amazement that I could not say one word.

"Pardon me," continued he, "if I have said anything that may seem like an intrusion upon your secret and most sacred feelings. I could not have said it had it not been for the deep affection I feel for Almah and for you, and for the reason that I am just now more moved than usual, and have less control over my feelings."

Saying this, he pressed my hand and left me. It was not the custom here to shake hands, but with his usual amiability he had adopted my custom, and used it as naturally as though he had been to the manner born.

I was encouraged now. The mild Kohen came often to cheer me. He talked much about Almah—about her sweet and gracious disposition, the love that all felt for her, the deep and intense interest which her illness had aroused. In all this he seemed more like a man of my own race than before, and in his eager desire for her recovery he failed to exhibit that love for death which was his nature. So it seemed: yet this desire for her recovery did not arise out of any lack of love for death; its true cause I was to learn afterward; and I was to know that if he desired Almah's recovery now, it was only that she might live long enough to encounter death in a more terrific form. But just then all this was unknown, and I judged him by myself.

At last I learned that she was much better, and would be out on the following jom. This intelligence filled me with a fever of eager anticipation, so great that I could think of nothing else. Sleep was impossible. I could only wait, and try as best I might to quell my impatience. At last the time came. I sat waiting. The curtain was drawn aside. I sprang up, and, hurrying toward her, I caught her in my arms and wept for joy. Ah me, how pale she looked! She bore still the marks of her illness. She seemed deeply embarrassed and agitated at the fervor of my greeting; while I, instead of apologizing or trying to excuse myself, only grew more agitated still.

"Oh, Almah," I cried. "I should have died if you had not come back to me! Oh, Almah, I love you better than life and I never knew how dearly I loved you till I thought that I had lost you! Oh, forgive me, but I must tell you—and don't weep, darling."

She was weeping as I spoke. She said nothing, but twined her arms around my neck and wept on my breast. After this we had much to say that we had never mentioned before. I cannot tell the sweet words that she said to me; but I now learned that she had loved me from the first—when I came to her in her loneliness, when she was homesick and heartsick; and I came, a kindred nature, of a race more like her own; and she saw in me the only one of all around her whom it was possible not to detest, and therefore she loved me.

We had many things to say to one another, and long exchanges of confidence to make. She now for the first time told me all the sorrow that she had endured in her captivity—sorrow which she had kept silent and shut up deep within her breast. At first her life here had been so terrible that it had brought her down nearly to death. After this she had sunk into dull despair; she had grown familiar with horrors and lived in a state of unnatural calm. From this my arrival had roused her. The display of feeling on my part had brought back all her old self, and roused anew all those feelings which in her had become dormant. The darkness, the bloodshed, the sacrifices, all these affected me as they had once affected her. I had the same fear of death which she had. When I had gone with her to the cheder nebilin, when I had used my sepet-ram to save life, she had perceived in me feelings and impulses to which all her own nature responded. Finally, when I asked about the Mista Kosek, she warned me not to go. When I did go she was with me in thought and suffered all that I felt, until the moment when I was brought back and laid senseless at
her feet.

"Then," said Almah, "I felt the full meaning of all that lies before us."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, anxiously. "You speak as though there were something yet--worse than what has already been; yet nothing can possibly be worse. We have seen the worst; let us now try to shake off these grisly thoughts, and be happy with one another. Your strength will soon be back, and while we have one another we can be happy even in this gloom."

"Ah me," said Almah, "it would be better now to die. I could die happy now, since I know that you love me."

"Death!" said I; "do not talk of it--do not mention that word. It is more abhorrent than ever. No, Almah, let us live and love--let us hope--let us fly."

"Impossible!" said she, in a mournful voice. "We cannot fly. There is no hope. We must face the future, and make up our minds to bear our fate."

"Fate!" I repeated, looking at her in wonder and in deep concern. "What do you mean by our fate? Is there anything more which you know and which I have not heard?"

"You have heard nothing," said she, slowly; "and all that you have seen and heard is as nothing compared with what lies before us. For you and for me there is a fate--inconceivable, abhorrent, tremendous!--a fate of which I dare not speak or even think, and from which there is no escape whatever."

As Almah said this she looked at me with an expression in which terror and anguish were striving with love. Her cheeks, which shortly before had flushed rosy red in sweet confusion, were now pallid, her lips ashen; her eyes were full of a wild despair. I looked at her in wonder, and could not say a word.

"Oh, Atam-or," said she, "I am afraid of death!"

"Almah," said I, "why will you speak of death? What is this fate which you fear so much?"

"It is this," said she hurriedly and with a shudder, "you and I are singled out. I have been reserved for years until one should be found who might be joined with me. You came. I saw it all at once. I have known it--dreaded it--tried to fight against it. But it was of no use. Oh, Atam-or, our love means death; for the very fact that you love me and I love you seals our doom!"

"Our doom? What doom?"

"The sacrifice!" exclaimed Almah, with another shudder. In her voice and look there was a terrible meaning, which I could not fail to take. I understood it now, and my blood curdled in my veins. Almah clung to me despairingly.

"Do not leave me!" she cried--"do not leave me! I have no one but you. The sacrifice, the sacrifice! It is our doom the great sacrifice--at the end of the dark season. It is at the amir. We must go there to meet our doom."

"The amir?" I asked; "what is that?"

"It is the metropolis," said she.

I was utterly overwhelmed, yet still I tried to console her; but the attempt was vain.

"Oh!" she cried, "you will not understand. The sacrifice is but a part--it is but the beginning. Death is terrible; yet it may be endured--if there is only death. But oh!--oh think!--think of that which comes after--the Mista Kosek!"

Now the full meaning flashed upon me, and I saw it all. In an instant there arose in my mind the awful sacrifice on the pyramid and the unutterable horror of the Mista Kosek. Oh, horror, horror, horror! Oh, hideous abomination and deed without a name! I could not speak. I caught her in my arms, and we both wept passionately.

The happiness of our love was now darkened by this tremendous cloud that lowered before us. The shock of this discovery was overpowering, and some time elapsed before I could rally from it. Though Almah's love was sweet beyond expression, and though as the time passed I saw that every jom she regained more and more of her former health and strength, still I could not forget what had been revealed. We were happy with one another, yet our happiness was clouded, and amid the brightness of our love there was ever present the dread spectre of our appalling doom.

These feelings, however, grew fainter. Hope is ever ready to arise; and I began to think that these people, though given to evil ways, were after all kind-hearted, and might listen to entreaty. Above all, there was the Kohen, so benevolent, so self-denying, so amiable, so sympathetic. I could not forget all that he had said during Almah's illness, and it seemed more than probable that an appeal to his better nature might not be without effect. I said as much to Almah.

"The Kohen," said she; "why, he can do nothing."

"Why not? He is the chief man here, and ought to have great influence."

"You don't understand," said she, with a sigh. "The Kohen is the lowest and least influential man in the city."

"Why, who are influential if he is not?" I asked.

"The paupers," said Almah.

"The paupers!" I exclaimed, in amazement.
"Yes," said Almah. "Here among these people the paupers form the most honored, influential, and envied portion of the community."

This was incomprehensible. Almah tried to explain, but to no purpose, and I determined to talk to the Kohen.

CHAPTER XV
THE KOHEN IS INEXORABLE

I determined to talk to the Kohen, and try for myself whether he might not be accessible to pity. This greatest of cannibals might, indeed, have his little peculiarities, I thought, and who has not?--yet at bottom he seemed full of tender and benevolent feeling; and as he evidently spent his whole time in the endeavor to make us happy, it seemed not unlikely that he might do something for our happiness in a case where our very existence was at stake.

The Kohen listened with deep attention as I stated my case. I did this fully and frankly. I talked of my love for Almah and of Almah's love for me; our hope that we might be united so as to live happily in reciprocal affection; and I was going on to speak of the dread that was in my heart when he interrupted me:

"You speak of being united," said he. "You talk strangely. Of course you mean that you wish to be separated."

"Separated!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean? Of course we wish to be united."

The Kohen stared at me as I said this with the look of one who was quite puzzled; and I then went on to speak of the fate that was before us, and to entreat his sympathy and his aid that we might be saved from so hideous a doom. To all these words the Kohen listened with an air of amazement, as though I were saying incomprehensible things.

"You have a gentle and an affectionate nature," I said--"a nature full of sympathy with others, and noble self-denial."

"Of course," said the Kohen, quickly, as though glad to get hold of something which he could understand, "of course we are all so, for we are so made. It is our nature. Who is there who is not self-denying? No one can help that."

This sounded strange indeed; but I did not care to criticize it. I came to my purpose direct and said,

"Save us from our fate."

"Your fate?"

"Yes, from death--that death of horror."

"Death?--horror? What do you mean by horror?" said the Kohen, in an amazement that was sincere and unfeigned. "I cannot comprehend your meaning. It seems as though you actually dislike death; but that is not conceivable. It cannot be possible that you fear death."

"Fear death!" I exclaimed, "I do--I do. Who is there that does not fear it?"

The Kohen stared.

"I do not understand you," he said.

"Do you not understand," said I, "that death is abhorrent to humanity?"

"Abhorrent!" said the Kohen; "that is impossible. Is it not the highest blessing? Who is there that does not long for death? Death is the greatest blessing, the chief desire of man--the highest aim. And you--are you not to be envied in having your felicity so near? above all, in having such a death as that which is appointed for you--so noble, so sublime? You must be mad; your happiness has turned your head."

All this seemed like hideous mockery, and I stared at the Kohen with a gaze that probably strengthened his opinion of my madness.

"Do you love death?" I asked at length, in amazement.

"Love death? What a question! Of course I love death--all men do; who does not? Is it not human nature? Do we not instinctively fly to meet it whenever we can? Do we not rush into the jaws of sea-monsters, or throw ourselves within their grasp? Who does not feel within him this intense longing after death as the strongest passion of his heart?"

"I don't know--I don't know," said I. "You are of a different race; I do not understand what you say. But I belong to a race that fears death. I fear death and love life; and I entreat you, I implore you to help me now in my distress, and assist me so that I may save my life and that of Almah."

"I--I help you!" said the Kohen, in new amazement. "Why do you come to me--to me, of all men? Why, I am nothing here. And help you to live--to live! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

And the Kohen looked at me with the same astonishment which I should evince if a man should ask me to help him to die.

Still, I persisted in my entreaty for his help.

"Such a request," said he, "is revolting; you must be mad. Such a request outrages all the instincts of humanity. And even if I could do such violence to my own nature as to help you to such a thing, how do you think I could face my fellow-men, or how could I endure the terrible punishment which would fall upon me?"
"Punishment!" said I. "What! would you be punished?"

"Punished!" said the Kohen. "That, of course, would be inevitable. I should be esteemed an unnatural monster and the chief of criminals. My lot in life now is painful enough; but in this case my punishment would involve me in evils without end. Riches would be poured upon me; I should be raised to the rank of Kohen Gadol; I should be removed farther away than ever from the pauper class--so far, indeed, that all hope in life would be over. I should be made the first and noblest and richest in all the land."

He spoke these words just as if he had said, "the lowest, meanest, poorest, and most infamous." It sounded like fresh mockery, and I could not believe but that he was amusing himself at my expense.

"This is cruel," said I. "You are mocking me."

"Cruel?--cruel?" said he; "what is cruel? You mean that such a fate would be cruel for me."

"No, no," said I; "but alas! I see we cannot understand one another."

"No," said the Kohen, musingly, as he looked at me. "No, it seems not; but tell me, Atam-or, is it possible that you really fear death--that you really love life?"

"Fear death!--love life!" I cried. "Who does not? Who can help it? Why do you ask me that?"

The Kohen clasped his hands in amazement.

"If you really fear death," said he, "what possible thing is there left to love or to hope for? What, then, do you think the highest blessing of man?"

"Long life," said I, "and riches and requited love."

At this the Kohen started back, and stared at me as though I were a raving madman.

"Oh, holy shades of night!" he exclaimed. "What is that you say? What do you mean?"

"We can never understand one another, I fear," said I. "The love of life must necessarily be the strongest passion of man. We are so made. We give up everything for life. A long life is everywhere considered as the highest blessing; and there is no one who is willing to die, no matter what his suffering may be. Riches also are desired by all, for poverty is the direst curse that can embitter life; and as to requited love, surely that is the sweetest, purest, and most divine joy that the human heart may know."

At this the Kohen burst forth in a strain of high excitement:

"Oh, sacred cavern gloom! Oh, divine darkness! Oh, impenetrable abysses of night! What, oh, what is this! Oh, Atam-or, are you mad? Alas! it must be so. Joy has turned your brain; you are quite demented. You call good evil, and evil good; our light is your darkness, and our darkness your light. Yet surely you cannot be altogether insane. Come, come, let us look further. How is it! Try now to recall your reason. A long life--a life, and a long one! Surely there can be no human being in a healthy state of nature who wishes to prolong his life; and as to riches, it is possible that anyone exists who really and honestly desires riches? Impossible! And requited love! Oh, Atam-or, you are mad to-day! You are always strange, but now you have quite taken leave of your senses. I cannot but love you, and yet I can never understand you. Tell me, and tell me truly, what is it that you consider evils, if these things that you have mentioned are not the very worst?"

He seemed deeply in earnest and much moved. I could not understand him, but could only answer his questions with simple conciseness.

"Poverty, sickness, and death," said I, "are evils; but the worst of all evils is unrequited love."

At these words the Kohen made a gesture of despair.

"It is impossible to understand this," said he. "You talk calmly; you have not the air of a madman. If your fellow-countrymen are all like you, then your race is an incomprehensible one. Why, death is the greatest blessing. We all long for it; it is the end of our being. As for riches, they are a curse, abhorred by all. Above all, as to love, we shrink from the thought of requital. Death is our chief blessing, poverty our greatest happiness, and unrequited love the sweetest lot of man."

All this sounded like the ravings of a lunatic, yet the Kohen was not mad. It seemed also like the mockery of some teasing demon; but the gentle and self-denying Kohen was no teasing demon, and mockery with him was impossible. I was therefore more bewildered than ever at this reiteration of sentiments that were so utterly incomprehensible. He, on the other hand, seemed as astonished at my sentiments and as bewildered, and we could find no common ground on which to meet.

"I remember now," said the Kohen, in a musing tone, "having heard of some strange folk at the Amir, who profess to feel as you say you feel, but no one believes that they are in earnest; for although they may even bring themselves to think that they are in earnest in their professions, yet after all everyone thinks that they are self-deceived. For you see, in the first place, these feelings which you profess are utterly unnatural. We are so made that we cannot help loving death; it is a sort of instinct. We are also created in such a way that we cannot help longing after poverty. The pauper must always, among all men, be the most envied of mortals. Nature, too, has made us such that the passion of love, when it arises, is so vehement, so all-consuming that it must always struggle to avoid
requisite. This is the reason why, when two people find that they love each other, they always separate and avoid one another for the rest of their lives. This is human nature. We cannot help it; and it is this that distinguishes us from the animals. Why, if men were to feel as you say you feel, they would be mere animals. Animals fear death; animals love to accumulate such things as they prize; animals, when they love, go in pairs, and remain with one another. But man, with his intellect, would not be man if he loved life and desired riches and sought for requited love."

I sank back in despair. "You cannot mean all this,” I said.

He threw at me a piteous glance. "What else can you believe or feel?” said he.

"The very opposite. We are so made that we hate and fear death; to us he is the King of Terrors. Poverty is terrible also, since it is associated with want and woe; it is, therefore, natural to man to strive after riches. As to the passion of love, that is so vehement that the first and only thought is requital. Unrequited love is anguish beyond expression--anguish so severe that the heart will often break under it."

The Kohen clasped his hands in new bewilderment.

"I cannot understand,” said he. "A madman might imagine that he loved life and desired riches; but as to love, why even a madman could not think of requital, for the very nature of the passion of love is the most utter self-surrender, and a shrinking from all requital; wherefore, the feeling that leads one to desire requital cannot be love. I do not know what it can be--indeed, I never heard of such a thing before, and the annals of the human race make no mention of such a feeling. For what is love? It is the ardent outflow of the whole being--the yearning of one human heart to lavish all its treasures upon another. Love is more than self-denial; it is self-surrender and utter self-abnegation. Love gives all away, and cannot possibly receive anything in return. A requital of love would mean selfishness, which would be self-contradiction. The more one loves, the more he must shrink from requital."

"What!” cried I, "among you do lovers never marry?"

"Lovers marry? Never!”

"Do married people never love one another?"

The Kohen shook his head.

"It unfortunately sometimes happens so,” said he, "and then the result is, of course, distressing. For the children's sake the parents will often remain with one another, but in many cases they separate. No one can tell the misery that ensues where a husband and wife love one another.”

The conversation grew insupportable. I could not follow the Kohen in what seemed the wildest and maddest flights of fancy that ever were known; so I began to talk of other things, and gradually the Kohen was drawn to speak of his own life. The account which he gave of himself was not one whit less strange than his previous remarks, and for this reason I add it here.

"I was born,” said he, "in the most enviable of positions. My father and mother were among the poorest in the land. Both died when I was a child, and I never saw them. I grew up in the open fields and public caverns, along with the most esteemed paupers. But, unfortunately for me, there was something wanting in my natural disposition. I loved death, of course, and poverty, too, very strongly; but I did not have that eager and energetic passion which is so desirable, nor was I watchful enough over my blessed estate of poverty. Surrounded as I was by those who were only too ready to take advantage of my ignorance or want of vigilance, I soon fell into evil ways, and gradually, in spite of myself, I found wealth pouring in upon me. Designing men succeeded in winning my consent to receive their possessions; and so I gradually fell away from that lofty position in which I was born. I grew richer and richer. My friends warned me, but in vain. I was too weak to resist; in fact, I lacked moral fibre, and had never learned how to say 'No.' So I went on, descending lower and lower in the scale of being. I became a capitalist, an Athon, a general officer, and finally Kohen."

"At length, on one eventful day, I learned that one of my associates had by a long course of reckless folly become the richest man in all the country. He had become Athon, Melek, and at last Kohen Gadol. It was a terrible shock, but I trust a salutary one. I at once resolved to reform. That resolution I have steadily kept, and have at least saved myself from descending any lower. It is true, I can hardly hope to become what I once was. It is only too easy to grow rich; and, you know, poverty once forfeited can never return except in rare instances. I have, however, succeeded in getting rid of most of my wealth, chiefly through the fortunate advent of Almah and afterward of yourself. This, I confess, has been my salvation. Neither of you had any scruples about accepting what was bestowed, and so I did not feel as though I was doing you any wrong in giving you all I had in the world. Most of the people of this city have taken advantage of your extraordinary indifference to wealth, and have made themselves paupers at your expense. I had already become your slave, and had received the promise of being elevated to the rank of scullion in the cavern of the Mista Kosek. But now, since this event of your love for Almah, I hope to gain far more. I am almost certain of being made a pauper, and I think I can almost venture to hope some day for the honor of a public death."

To such a story I had nothing to say. It was sheer madness; yet it was terribly suggestive, and showed how
utterly hopeless was my effort to secure the assistance of such a man toward my escape from death.

"A public death!" I said, grimly. "That will be very fortunate! And do you think that you will gain the dignity of being eaten up afterward?"

The Kohen shook his head in all seriousness.

"Oh no," said he; "that would be far beyond my deserts. That is an honor which is only bestowed upon the most distinguished."

CHAPTER XVI

THE KOSEKIN

These people call themselves the Kosekin. Their chief characteristic, or, at least, their most prominent one, is their love of darkness, which perhaps is due to their habit of dwelling in caves. Another feeling, equally strong and perhaps connected with this, is their love of death and dislike of life. This is visible in many ways, and affects all their character. It leads to a passionate self-denial, an incessant effort to benefit others at their own expense. Each one hates life and longs for death. He, therefore, hates riches, and all things that are associated with life.

Among the Kosekin everyone makes perpetual efforts to serve others, which, however, are perpetually baffled by the unselfishness of these others. People thus spend years in trying to overreach one another, so as to make others richer than themselves. In a race each one tries to keep behind; but as this leads to confusion, there is then a universal effort for each one to be first, so as to put his neighbor in the honorable position of the rear. It is the same way in a hunt. Each one presses forward, so as to honor his companion by leaving him behind. Instead of injuring, everyone tries to benefit his neighbor. When one has been benefited by another, he is filled with a passion which may be called Kosekin revenge—namely, a sleepless and vehement desire to bestow some adequate and corresponding benefit on the other. Feuds are thus kept up among families and wars among nations. For no one is willing to accept from another any kindness, any gift, or any honor, and all are continually on the watch to prevent themselves from being overreached in this way. Those who are less watchful than others are overwhelmed with gifts by designing men, who wish to attain to the pauper class. The position of Almah and myself illustrates this. Our ignorance of the blessings and honors of poverty led us to receive whatever was offered us. Taking advantage of our innocence and ignorance, the whole city thereupon proceeded to bestow their property upon us, and all became paupers through our fortunate arrival.

No one ever injures another unless by accident, and when this occurs it affords the highest joy to the injured party. He has now a claim on the injurer; he gets him into his power, is able to confer benefits on him and force upon him all that he wishes. The unhappy injurer, thus punished by the reception of wealth, finds himself helpless; and where the injury is great, the injured man may bestow upon the other all his wealth and attain to the envied condition of a pauper.

Among the Kosekin the sick are objects of the highest regard. All classes vie with one another in their attentions. The rich send their luxuries; the paupers, however, not having anything to give, go themselves and wait on them and nurse them. For this there is no help, and the rich grumble, but can do nothing. The sick are thus sought out incessantly, and most carefully tended. When they die there is great rejoicing, since death is a blessing; but the nurses labor hard to preserve them in life, so as to prolong the enjoyment of the high privilege of nursing. Of all sick the incurable are most honored, since they require nursing always. Children also are highly honored and esteemed, and the aged too, since both classes require the care of others and must be the recipients of favors which all are anxious to bestow. Those who suffer from contagious diseases are more sought after than any other class, for in waiting on these there is the chance of gaining the blessing of death; indeed, in these cases much trouble is usually experienced from the rush of those who insist on offering their services.

For it must never be forgotten that the Kosekin love death as we love life; and this accounts for all those ceremonies which to me were so abhorrent, especially the scenes of the Mista Kosek. To them a dead human body is no more than the dead body of a bird: there is no awe felt, no sense of sanctity, of superstitious horror; and so I learned, with a shudder, that the hate of life is a far worse thing than the fear of death. This desire for death is, then, a master-passion, and is the key to all their words and acts. They rejoice over the death of friends, since those friends have gained the greatest of blessings; they rejoice also at the birth of children, since those who are born will one day gain the bliss of death.

For a couple to fall in love is the signal for mutual self-surrender. Each insists on giving up the loved one; and the more passionately the love is, the more eager is the desire to have the loved one married to someone else. Lovers have died broken-hearted from being compelled to marry one another. Poets here among the Kosekin celebrate unhappy love which has met with this end. These poets also celebrate defeats instead of victories, since it is considered glorious for one nation to sacrifice itself to another; but to this there are important limitations, as we shall see. Poets also celebrate street-sweepers, scavengers, lamp-lighters, laborers, and above all, paupers, and pass by as unworthy of notice the authors, Meleks, and Kohens of the land.
The paupers here form the most honorable class. Next to these are the laborers. These have strikes as with us; but it is always for harder work, longer hours, or smaller pay. The contest between capital and labor rages, but the conditions are reversed; for the grumbling capitalist complains that the laborer will not take as much pay as he ought to while the laborer thinks the capitalist too persistent in his efforts to force money upon him.

Here among the Kosekin the wealthy class forms the mass of the people, while the aristocratic few consist of the paupers. These are greatly envied by the others, and have many advantages. The cares and burdens of wealth, as well as wealth itself, are here considered a curse, and from all these the paupers are exempt. There is a perpetual effort on the part of the wealthy to induce the paupers to accept gifts, just as among us the poor try to rob the rich. Among the wealthy there is a great and incessant murmur at the obstinacy of the paupers. Secret movements are sometimes set on foot which aim at a redistribution of property and a levelling of all classes, so as to reduce the haughty paupers to the same condition as the mass of the nation. More than once there has been a violent attempt at a revolution, so as to force wealth on the paupers; but as a general thing these movements have been put down and their leaders severely punished. The paupers have shown no mercy in their hour of triumph; they have not conceded one jot to the public demand, and the unhappy conspirators have been condemned to increased wealth and luxury, while the leaders have been made Meleks and Kohens. Thus there are among the Kosekin the unfortunate many who are cursed with wealth, and the fortunate few who are blessed with poverty. These walk while the others ride, and from their squalid huts look proudly and contemptuously upon the palaces of their unfortunate fellow-countrymen.

The love of death leads to perpetual efforts on the part of each to lay down his life for another. This is a grave difficulty in hunts and battles. Confined prisoners dare not fly, for in such an event the guards kill themselves. This leads to fresh rigors in the captivity of the prisoners in case of their recapture, for they are overwhelmed with fresh luxuries and increased splendors. Finally, if a prisoner persist and is recaptured, he is solemnly put to death, not, as with us, by way of severity, but as the last and greatest honor. Here extremes meet; and death, whether for honor or dishonor, is all the same—death—and is reserved for desperate cases. But among the Kosekin this lofty destiny is somewhat embittered by the agonizing thought on the part of the prisoner, who thus gains it, that his wretched family must be doomed, not, as with us, to poverty and want, but, on the contrary, to boundless wealth and splendor.

Among so strange a people it seemed singular to me what offences could possibly be committed which could be regarded and punished as crimes. These, however, I soon found out. Instead of robbers, the Kosekin punished the secret bestowers of their wealth on others. This is regarded as a very grave offence. Analogous to our crime of piracy is the forcible arrest of ships at sea and the transfer to them of valuables. Sometimes the Kosekin pirates give themselves up as slaves. Kidnapping, assault, highway robbery, and crimes of violence have their parallel here in cases where a strong man, meeting a weaker, forces himself upon him as his slave or compels him to take his purse. If the weaker refuse, the assailant threatens to kill himself, which act would lay the other under obligations to receive punishment from the state in the shape of gifts and honors, or at least subject him to unpleasant inquiries. Murder has its counterpart among the Kosekin in cases where one man meets another, forces money on him, and kills himself. Forgery occurs wherever one uses another's name so as to confer money on him.

There are many other crimes, all of which are severely punished. The worse the offence is, the better is the offender treated. Among the Kosekin capital punishment is imprisonment amid the greatest splendor, where the prisoner is treated like a king, and has many palaces and great retinues; for that which we consider the highest they regard as the lowest, and with them the chief post of honor is what we would call the lowest menial office. This is regarded as a very grave offence. Analogous to our crime of piracy is the forcible arrest of ships at sea and the transfer to them of valuables. Sometimes the Kosekin pirates give themselves up as slaves. Kidnapping, assault, highway robbery, and crimes of violence have their parallel here in cases where a strong man, meeting a weaker, forces himself upon him as his slave or compels him to take his purse. If the weaker refuse, the assailant threatens to kill himself, which act would lay the other under obligations to receive punishment from the state in the shape of gifts and honors, or at least subject him to unpleasant inquiries. Murder has its counterpart among the Kosekin in cases where one man meets another, forces money on him, and kills himself. Forgery occurs wherever one uses another's name so as to confer money on him.

State politics here move, like individual affairs, upon the great principle of contempt for earthly things. The state is willing to destroy itself for the good of other states; but as other states are in the same position, nothing can result. In times of war the object of each army is to honor the other and benefit it by giving it the glory of defeat. The contest is thus most fierce. The Kosekin, through their passionate love of death, are terrible in battle; and when they are also animated by the desire to confer glory on their enemies by defeating them, they generally succeed in their aim. This makes them almost always victorious, and when they are not so not a soul returns alive. Their state of mind is peculiar. If they are defeated they rejoice, since defeat is their chief glory; but if they are victorious they rejoice still more in the benevolent thought that they have conferred upon the enemy the joy, the glory, and the honor of defeat.

Here all shrink from governing others. The highest wish of each is to serve. The Meleks and Kohens, whom I at first considered the highest, are really the lowest orders; next to these come the authors, then the merchants, then farmers, then artisans, then laborers, and, finally, the highest rank is reached in the paupers. Happy the aristocratic,
the haughty, the envied paupers! The same thing is seen in their armies. The privates here are highest in rank, and
the officers come next in different graduations. These officers, however, have the command and the charge of affairs
as with us; yet this is consistent with their position, for here to obey is considered nobler than to command. In the
fleet the rowers are the highest class; next come the fighting-men; and lowest of all are the officers. War arises from
motives as peculiar as those which give rise to private feuds; as, for instance, where one nation tries to force a
province upon another; where they try to make each other greater; where they try to benefit unduly each other's
commerce; where one may have a smaller fleet or army than has been agreed on, or where an ambassador has been
presented with gifts, or received too great honor or attention.

In such a country as this, where riches are disliked and despised, I could not imagine how people could be
induced to engage in trade. This, however, was soon explained. The laborers and artisans have to perform their daily
work, so as to enable the community to live and move and have its being. Their impelling motive is the high one of
benefiting others most directly. They refuse anything but the very smallest pay, and insist on giving for this the
utmost possible labor. Tradesmen also have to supply the community with articles of all sorts; merchants have to sail
their ships to the same end—all being animated by the desire of effecting the good of others. Each one tries not to
make money, but to lose it; but as the competition is sharp and universal, this is difficult, and the larger portion are
unsuccessful. The purchasers are eager to pay as much as possible, and the merchants and traders grow rich in spite
of their utmost endeavors. The wealthy classes go into business so as to lose money, but in this they seldom succeed.
It has been calculated that only two per cent in every community succeed in reaching the pauper class. The tendency
is for all the labors of the working-class to be ultimately turned upon the unfortunate wealthy class. The workmen
being the creators of wealth, and refusing to take adequate pay, cause a final accumulation of the wealth of the
community in the hands of the mass of the non-producers, who thus are fixed in their unhappy position, and can
hope for no escape except by death. The farmers till the ground, the fishermen fish, the laborers toil, and the wealth
thus created is pushed from these incessantly till it all falls upon the lowest class—namely, the rich, including
Aths, Meleks, and Kohens. It is a burden that is often too heavy to be borne; but there is no help for it, and the
better-minded seek to cultivate resignation.

Women and men are in every respect absolutely equal, holding precisely the same offices and doing the same
work. In general, however, it is observed that women are a little less fond of death than men, and a little less
unwilling to receive gifts. For this reason they are very numerous among the wealthy class, and abound in the offices
of administration. Women serve in the army and navy as well as men, and from their lack of ambition or energetic
perseverance they are usually relegated to the lower ranks, such as officers and generals. To my mind it seemed as
though the women were in all the offices of honor and dignity, but in reality it was the very opposite. The same is
ture in the family. The husbands insist on giving everything to the wives and doing everything for them. The wives
are therefore universally the rulers of the household while the husbands have an apparently subordinate, but, to the
Kosekin, a more honorable position.

As to the religion of the Kosekin, I could make nothing of it. They believe that after death they go to what they
call the world of darkness. The death they long for leads to the darkness that they love; and the death and the
darkness are eternal. Still, they persist in saying that the death and the darkness together form a state of bliss. They
are eloquent about the happiness that awaits them there in the sunless land—the world of darkness; but for my own
part, it always seemed to me a state of nothingness.

CHAPTER XVII
BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

The doctor was here interrupted by Featherstone, who, with a yawn, informed him that it was eleven o'clock,
and that human endurance had its limits. Upon this the doctor rolled up the manuscript and put it aside for the night,
after which supper was ordered.

"Well," said Featherstone, "what do you think of this last?"
"It contains some very remarkable statements," said the doctor.
"There are certainly monsters enough in it," said Melick--
"Gorgons, and hydras, and chimeras dire."
"Well, why not?" said the doctor.
"It seems to me," said Melick, "that the writer of this has peopled his world with creatures that resemble the
fossil animals more than anything else."
"The so-called fossil animals," said the doctor, "may not be extinct. There are fossil specimens of animals that
still have living representatives. There is no reason why many of those supposed to be extinct may not be alive now.
It is well known that many very remarkable animals have become extinct within a comparatively recent period.
These great birds, of which More speaks, seem to me to belong to these classes. The dodo was in existence fifty
years ago, the moa about a hundred years ago. These great birds, together with others, such as the epiornis and
palapteryx, have disappeared, not through the ordinary course of nature, but by the hand of man. Even in our
hemisphere they may yet be found. Who can tell but that the moa or the dodo may yet be lurking somewhere here in
the interior of Madagascar, of Borneo, or of Papua?"

"Can you make out anything about those great birds?" asked Featherstone. "Do they resemble anything that
exists now, or has ever existed?"

"Well, yes, I think so," said the doctor. "Unfortunately, More is not at all close or accurate in his descriptions;
he has a decidedly unscientific mind, and so one cannot feel sure; yet from his general statements I think I can
decide pretty nearly upon the nature and the scientific name of each one of his birds and animals. It is quite evident
to me that most of these animals belong to races that no longer exist among us, and that this world at the South Pole
has many characteristics which are like those of what is known as the Coal Period. I allude in particular to the vast
forests of fern, of gigantic grasses and reeds. At the same time the general climate and the atmosphere seem like
what we may find in the tropics at present. It is evident that in More's world various epochs are represented, and that
animals of different ages are living side by side."

"What do you think of the opkuk?" asked Featherstone, with a yawn.

"Well, I hardly know."

"Why, it must be a dodo, of course," said Melick, "only magnified."

"That," said the doctor, gravely, "is a thought that naturally suggests itself; but then the opkuk is certainly far
larger than the dodo."

"Oh, More put on his magnifying-glasses just then."

"The dodo," continued the doctor, taking no notice of this, "in other respects corresponds with More's
description of the opkuk. Clusius and Bontius give good descriptions and there is a well-known picture of one in the
British Museum. It is a massive, clumsy bird, ungraceful in its form with heavy movements, wings too short for
flight, little or no tail, and down rather than feathers. The body, according to Bontius, is as big as that of the African
ostrich, but the legs are very short. It has a large head, great black eyes, long bluish-white bill, ending in a beak like
that of a vulture, yellow legs, thick and short, four toes on each foot solid, long, and armed with sharp black claws.
The flesh particularly on the breast, is fat and esculent. Now, all this corresponds with More's account, except as to
the size of the two, for the opkukas are as large as oxen."

"Oh, that's nothing," said Melick; "I'm determined to stand up for the dodo." With this he burst forth singing--

"Oh, the dodo once lived, but he doesn't live now; Yet why should a cloud overshadow our brow? The loss of
that bird ne'er should trouble our brains, For though he is gone, still our claret remains. Sing do-do--jolly do-do!
Hurrah! in his name let our cups overflow."

"As for your definition, doctor," continued Melick, "I'll give you one worth a dozen of yours:

"'Twas a mighty bird; those strong, short legs were never known to fail, And he felt a glory of pride while
thinking of that little tail, And his beak was marked with vigor, curving like a wondrous hook; Thick and ugly was
his body--such a form as made one look!"

"Melick," said Featherstone, "you're a volatile youth. You mustn't mind him, doctor. He's a professional cynic,
sceptic, and scoffer. Oxenden and I, however, are open to conviction, and want to know more about those birds and
beasts. Can you make anything out of the opmahera?"

The doctor swallowed a glass of wine, and replied:

"Oh yes; there are many birds, each of which may be the opmahera. There's the fossil bird of Massachusetts, of
which nothing is left but the footprints; but some of these are eighteen inches in length, and show a stride of two
yards. The bird belonged to the order of the Grallae, and may have been ten or twelve feet in height. Then there is
the Gastornis parisienis, which was as tall as an ostrich, as big as an ox, and belongs to the same order as the other.
Then there is the Palapteryx, of which remains have been found in New Zealand, which was seven or eight feet in
height. But the one which to my mind is the real counterpart of the opmahera is the Dinornis gigantea, whose
remains are also found in New Zealand. It is the largest bird known, with long legs, a long neck, and short wings,
useless for flight. One specimen that has been found is upward of thirteen feet in height. There is no reason why
some should not have been much taller. More compares it to that of a giraffe. The Maoris call this bird the
Moa, and their legends and traditions are full of mention of it. When they first came to the island, six or seven
hundred years ago, they found these vast birds everywhere, and hunted them for food. To my mind the dinornis is
the opmahera of More. As to riding on them, that is likely enough; for ostriches are used for this purpose, and the
dinornis must have been far stronger and fleeter than the ostrich. It is possible that some of these birds may still be
living in the remoter parts of our hemisphere."

"What about those monsters," asked Featherstone, "that More speaks of in the sacred hunt?"

"I think," said the doctor, "that I understand pretty well what they were, and can identify them all. As the galley
passed the estuary of that great river, you remember that he mentions seeing them on the shore. One may have been
the Ichthyosaurus. This, as the name implies, is a fish-lizard. It has the head of a lizard, the snout of a dolphin, the teeth of an alligator, enormous eyes, whose membrane is strengthened by a bony frame, the vertebrae of fishes, sternum and shoulder-bones like those of the lizard, and the fins of a whale. Bayle calls it the whale of the saurians. Another may have been the Cheirotherium. On account of the hand-shaped marks made by its paws, Owen thinks that it was akin to the frogs; but it was a formidable monster, with head and jaws of a crocodile. Another may have been the Teleosaurus, which resembled our alligators. It was thirty-five feet in length. Then there was the Hylaeosaurus, a monster twenty-five feet in length, with a cuirass of bony plates."

"But none of these correspond with More's description of the monster that fought with the galley."

"No," said the doctor, "I am coming to that now. That monster could have been no other than the Plesiosaurus, one of the most wonderful animals that has ever existed. Imagine a thing with the head of a lizard, the teeth of a crocodile, the neck of a swan, the trunk and tail of a quadruped, and the fins of a whale. Imagine a whale with its head and neck consisting of a serpent, with the strength of the former and the malignant fury of the latter, and then you will have the plesiosaurus. It was an aquatic animal, yet it had to remain near or on the surface of the water, while its long, serpent-like neck enabled it to reach its prey above or below with swift, far-reaching darts. Yet it had no armor, and could not have been at all a match for the ichthyosaurus. More's account shows, however, that it was a fearful enemy for man to encounter."

"He seems to have been less formidable than that beast which they encountered in the swamp. Have you any idea what that was?"

"I think it can have been no other than the Iguanodon," said the doctor. "The remains of this animal show that it must have been the most gigantic of all primeval saurians. Judging from existing remains its length was not less than sixty feet, and larger ones may have existed. It stood high on its legs; the hind ones were larger than the fore. The feet were massive and armed with tremendous claws. It lived on the land and fed on herbage. It had a horny, spiky ridge all along its back. Its tail was nearly as long as its body. Its head was short, its jaws enormous, furnished with teeth of a very elaborate structure, and on its muzzle it carried a curved horn. Such a beast as this might well have caused all that destruction of life on the part of his desperate assailants of which More speaks."

"Then there was another animal," continued the doctor, who was evidently discoursing upon a favorite topic. "It was the one that came suddenly upon More while he was resting with Almah after his flight with the run-away bird. That I take to be the Megalosaurus. This animal was a monster of tremendous size and strength. Cuvier thought that it might have been seventy feet in length. It was carnivorous, and therefore more ferocious than the iguanodon, and more ready to attack. Its head was like that of a crocodile, its body massive like that of an elephant, yet larger; its tail was small, and it stood high on its legs, so that it could run with great speed. It was not covered with bony armor, but had probably a hide thick enough to serve the purpose of shell or bone. Its teeth were constructed so as to cut with their edges, and the movement of the jaws produced the combined effect of knife and saw, while their inward curve rendered impossible the escape of prey that had once been caught. It probably frequented the river banks, where it fed upon reptiles of smaller size which inhabited the same places."

"More," continued the doctor, "is too general in his descriptions. He has not a scientific mind, and he gives but few data; yet I can bring before myself very easily all the scenes which he describes, particularly that one in which the megalosaurus approaches, and he rushes to mount the dinorisis so as to escape. I see that river, with its trees and shrubs, all unknown now except in museums--the vegetation of the Coal Period--the lepidodendron, the lepidostrobus, the pecopteris, the neuropteris, the lonchopteris, the odontopteris, the sphenopteris, the cyclopteris, the sigellaria veniformis, the sphenophyllum, the calamites--"

Melick started to his feet.

"There, there!" he cried, "hold hard, doctor. Talking of calamities, what greater calamity can there be than such a torrent of unknown words? Talk English, doctor, and we shall be able to appreciate you; but to make your jokes, your conundrums, and your brilliant witticisms in a foreign language isn't fair to us, and does no credit either to your head or your heart."

The doctor elevated his eyebrows, and took no notice of Melick's ill-timed levity.

"All these stories of strange animals," said Oxenden, "may be very interesting, doctor, but I must say that I am far more struck by the account of the people themselves. I wonder whether they are an aboriginal race, or descendants of the same stock from which we came?"

"I should say," remarked the doctor, confidently, "that they are, beyond a doubt, an aboriginal and autochthonous race."

"I differ from you altogether," said Oxenden, calmly.

"Oh," said the doctor, "there can be no doubt about it. Their complexion, small stature, and peculiar eyes--their love of darkness, their singular characteristics, both physical and moral, all go to show that they can have no connection with the races in our part of the earth."
"Their peculiar eyes," said Oxenden, "are no doubt produced by dwelling in caves for many generations."
"On the contrary," said the doctor, "it is their peculiarity of eye that makes them dwell in caves."
"You are mistaking the cause for the effect, doctor."
"Not at all; it is you who are making that mistake."
"It's the old debate," said Melick. "As the poet has it:
"'Which was first, the egg or the hen? Tell me, I pray, ye learned men!'
"There are the eyeless fishes of the great cave of Kentucky," said Oxenden, "whose eyes have become extinct from living in the dark."
"No," cried the doctor; "the fish that have arisen in that lake have never needed eyes, and have never had them."
Oxenden laughed.
"Well," said he, "I'll discuss the question with you on different grounds altogether, and I will show clearly that these men, these bearded men, must belong to a stock that is nearly related to our own, or, at least, that they belong to a race of men with whom we are all very familiar."
"I should like very much to have you try it," said the doctor.
"Very well," said Oxenden. "In the first place, I take their language."
"Their language!"
"Yes. More has given us very many words in their language. Now he himself says that these words had an Arabic sound. He was slightly acquainted with that language. What will you say if I tell you that these words are still more like Hebrew?"
"Hebrew!" exclaimed the doctor, in amazement.
"Yes, Hebrew," said Oxenden. "They are all very much like Hebrew words, and the difference is not greater than that which exists between the words of any two languages of the Aryan family."
"Oh, if you come to philology I'll throw up the sponge," said the doctor. "Yet I should like to hear what you have to say on that point."
"The languages of the Aryan family," said Oxenden, "have the same general characteristics, and in all of them the differences that exist in their most common words are subject to the action of a regular law. The action of the law is best seen in the changes which take place in the mutes. These changes are indicated in a summary and comprehensive way by means of what is called 'Grimm's Law.' Take Latin and English, for instance. 'Grimm's Law' tells us, among other things, that in Latin and in that part of English which is of Teutonic origin, a large number of words are essentially the same, and differ merely in certain phonetic changes. Take the word 'father.' In Latin, as also in Greek, it is 'pater.' Now the Latin 'p' in English becomes 'f;' that is, the thin mute becomes the aspirated mute. The same change may be seen in the Latin 'piscis,' which in English is 'fish,' and the Greek '[pi upsilon rho]' which in English is 'fire.' Again, if the Latin or Greek word begins with an aspirate, the English word begins with a medial; thus the Latin 'f' is found responsive to the English 'b,' as in Latin 'agus,' English 'beech,' Latin 'fero,' English 'bear.' Again, if the Latin or Greek has the medial, the English has the thin, as in Latin 'duo,' English 'two,' Latin 'genu,' English 'knee.' Now, I find that in many of the words which More mentions this same 'Grimm's Law' will apply; and I am inclined to think that if they were spelled with perfect accuracy they would show the same relation between the Kosekin language and the Hebrew that there is between the Saxon English and the Latin."

The doctor gave a heavy sigh.
"You're out of my depth, Oxenden," said he. "I'm nothing of a philologist."
"By Jove!" said Featherstone, "I like this. This is equal to your list of the plants of the Coal Period, doctor. But I say, Oxenden, while you are about it, why don't you give us a little dose of Anglo-Saxon and Sanscrit? By Jove! the fellow has Bopp by heart, and yet he expects us to argue with him."
"I have it!" cried Melick. "The Kosekin are the lost Ten Tribes. Oxenden is feeling his way to that. He is going to make them out to be all Hebrew; and then, of course, the only conclusion will be that they are the Ten Tribes, who after a life of strange vicissitudes have pulled up at the South Pole. It's a wonder More didn't think of that--or the writer of this yarn, whoever he may be. Well, for my part, I always took a deep interest in the lost Ten Tribes, and thought them a fine body of men."

"Don't think they've got much of the Jew about them," said Featherstone, languidly. "They hate riches and all that, you know. Break a Jew's heart to hear of all that property wasted, and money going a-begging. Not a bad idea, though, that of theirs about money. Too much money's a howwid baw, by Jove!"

"Well," continued Oxenden, calmly resuming, and taking no notice of these interruptions, "I can give you word after word that More has mentioned which corresponds to a kindred Hebrew word in accordance with 'Grimm's Law.' For instance, Kosekin 'Op,' Hebrew 'Oph;' Kosekin 'Athon,' Hebrew 'Adon;' Kosekin 'Salon,' Hebrew 'Shalom.' They are more like Hebrew than Arabic, just as Anglo-Saxon words are more like Latin than Greek than Sanscrit."

"Hurrah!" cried Melick, "we've got him to Sanscrit at last! Now, Oxenden, my boy, trot out the 'Hitopadesa,' the 'Megha Dhuta,' the 'Rig Veda.' Quote 'Beowulf' and Caedmon. Gives us a little Zeno, and wind up with 'Lalla Rookh' in modern Persian."

"So I conclude," said Oxenden, calmly, ignoring Melick, "that the Kosekin are a Semitic people. Their complexion and their beards show them to be akin to the Caucasian race, and their language proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that they belong to the Semitic branch of that race. It is impossible for an autochthonous people to have such a language."

"But how," cried the doctor--"how in the name of wonder did they get to the South Pole?"
"Easily enough," interrupted Melick--"Shem landed there from Noah's ark, and left some of his children to colonize the country. That's as plain as a pikestaff. I think, on the whole, that this idea is better than the other one about the Ten Tribes. At any rate they are both mine, and I warn all present to keep their hands off them, for on my return I intend to take out a copyright."

"There's another thing," continued Oxenden, "which is of immense importance, and that is their habit of cave-dwelling. I am inclined to think that they resorted to cave-dwelling at first from some hereditary instinct or other, and that their eyes and their whole morals have become affected by this mode of life. Now, as to ornamented caverns, we have many examples--caverns adorned with a splendor fully equal to anything among the Kosekin. There are in India the great Behar caves, the splendid Karl temple with its magnificent sculptures and imposing architecture, and the cavern-temples of Elephanta; there are the subterranean works in Egypt, the temple of Dendera in particular; in Petra we have the case of an entire city excavated from the rocky mountains; yet, after all, these do not bear upon the point in question, for they are isolated cases; and even Petra, though it contained a city, did not contain a nation. But there is a case, and one which is well known, that bears directly upon this question, and gives us the connecting link between the Kosekin and their Semitic brethren in the northern hemisphere."

"What is that?" asked the doctor.

"The Trogloodytes," said Oxenden, with impressive solemnity.

"Well, and what do you make out of the Trogloodytes?"

"I will explain," said Oxenden. "The name Trogloodytes is given to various tribes of men, but those best known and celebrated under this name once inhabited the shores of the Red Sea, both on the Arabian and the Egyptian side. They belonged to the Arabian race, and were consequently a Semitic people. Mark that, for it is a point of the utmost importance. Now, these Trogloodytes all lived in caverns, which were formed partly by art and partly by nature, although art must have had most to do with the construction of such vast subterranean works. They lived in great communities in caverns, and they had long tunnels passing from one community to another. Here also they kept their cattle. Some of these people have survived even to our own age; for Bruce, the Abyssinian traveller, saw them in Nubia.

"The earliest writer who mentions the Trogloodytes was Agatharchides, of Cnidos. According to him they were chiefly herdsmen. Their food was the flesh of cattle, and their drink a mixture of milk and blood. They dressed in the skins of cattle; they tattooed their bodies. They were very swift of foot, and were able to run down wild beasts in the hunt. They were also greatly given to robbery, and caravans passing to and fro had to guard against them.

"One feature in their character has to my mind a strange significance, and that is their feelings with regard to death. It was not the Kosekin love of death, yet it was something which must certainly be considered as approximating to it. For Agatharchides says that in their burials they were accustomed to fasten the corpse to a stake, and then gathering round, to pelt it with stones amid shouts of laughter and wild merriment. They also used to strangle the old and infirm, so as to deliver them from the evils of life. These Trogloodytes, then, were a nation of cave-dwellers, loving the dark--not exactly loving death, yet at any rate regarding it with merriment and pleasure; and so I cannot help seeing a connection between them and the Kosekin."

"Yes," said the doctor, "but how did they get to the South Pole?"

"That," said Oxenden, "is a question which I do not feel bound to answer."

"Oh, it is easy enough to answer that," said Melick. "They, of course, dug through the earth."

Oxenden gave a groan.

"I think I'll turn in for the night," said he, rising. Upon this the others rose also and followed his example.

On the following morning the calm still continued. None of the party rose until very late, and then over the breakfast-table they discussed the manuscript once more, each from his own point of view, Melick still asserting a contemptuous scepticism--Oxenden and the doctor giving reasons for their faith, and Featherstone listening without saying much on either side.

At length it was proposed to resume the reading of the manuscript, which task would now devolve upon Oxenden. They adjourned to the deck, where all disposed themselves in easy attitudes to listen to the continuation of More's narrative.

CHAPTER XVIII
A VOYAGE OVER THE POLE

The discovery of our love had brought a crisis in our fate for me and Almah. The Kohen hailed it with joy, for now was the time when he would be able to present us to the Kohen Gadol. Our doom was certain and inevitable. We were to be taken to the amir; we were to be kept until the end of the dark season, and then we were both to be publicly sacrificed. After this our bodies were to be set apart for the hideous rites of the Mista Kosek. Such was the fate that lay before us.

The Kohen was now anxious to take us to the amir. I might possibly have persuaded him to postpone our
departure, but I saw no use in that. It seemed better to go, for it was possible that amid new scenes and among new people there might be hope. This, too, seemed probable to Almah, who was quite anxious to go. The Kohen pressed forward the preparations, and at length a galley was ready for us.

This galley was about three hundred feet in length and fifty in width, but not more than six feet in depth. It was like a long raft. The rowers, two hundred in number, sat on a level with the water, one hundred on each side. The oars were small, being not more than twelve feet in length, but made of very light, tough material, with very broad blades. The galley was steered with broad-bladed paddles at both ends. There was no mast or sail. Astern was a light poop, surrounded by a pavilion, and forward there was another. At the bow there was a projecting platform, used chiefly in fighting the thannin, or sea-monsters, and also in war. There were no masts or flags or gay streamers; no brilliant colors; all was intensely black, and the ornaments were of the same hue.

We were now treated with greater reverence than ever, for we were looked upon as the recipients of the highest honor that could fall to any of the Kosekin—namely, the envied dignity of a public death. As we embarked the whole city lined the public ways, and watched us from the quays, from boats, and from other galleys. Songs were sung by a chosen choir of paupers, and to the sound of this plaintive strain we moved out to sea.

"This will be a great journey for me," said the Kohen, as we left the port. "I hope to be made a pauper at least, and perhaps gain the honor of a public death. I have known people who have gained death for less. There was an Athon last year who attacked a pehmet with forty men and one hundred and twenty rowers. All were killed or drowned except himself. In reward for this he gained the mudecheb, or death recompense. In addition to this he was set apart for the Mista Kosek."

"Then, with you, when a man procures the death of others he is honored?"

"Why, yes; how could it be otherwise?" said the Kohen. "Is it not the same with you? Have you not told me incredible things about your people, among which there were a few that seemed natural and intelligible? Among these was your system of honoring above all men those who procure the death of the largest number. You, with your pretended fear of death, wish to meet it in battle as eagerly as we do, and your most renowned men are those who have sent most to death."

To this strange remark I had no answer to make.

The air out at sea now grew chillier. The Kohen noticed it also, and offered me his cloak, which I refused. He seemed surprised, and smiled.

"You are growing like one of us," said he. "You will soon learn that the greatest happiness in life is to do good to others and sacrifice yourself. You already show this in part. When you are with Almah you act like one of the Kosekin. You watch her to see and anticipate her slightest wish; you are eager to give her everything. She, on the other hand, is equally eager to give up all to you. Each one of you is willing to lay down life for the other. You would gladly rush upon death to save her from harm, much as you pretend to fear death; and so I see that with Almah you will soon learn how sweet a thing death may be."

"To live without her," said I, "would be so bitter that death with her would indeed be sweet. If I could save her life by laying down my own, death would be sweeter still; and not one of you Kosekin would meet it so gladly."

The Kosekin smiled joyously.

"Oh, almighty and wondrous power of Love!" he exclaimed, "how thou hast transformed this foreigner! Oh, Atam-or! you will soon be one of us altogether. For see, how is it now? You pretend to love riches and life, and yet you are ready to give up everything for Almahn."

"Gladly, gladly!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said, "all that you have--you would gladly lavish on her, and would rejoice to make yourself a pauper for her sweet sake. You also would rejoice equally to give up life for her. Is it not so?"

"It is," said I.

"Then I see by this that Almah has awakened within you your true human nature. Thus far it has lain dormant; it has been concealed under a thousand false and unnatural habits, arising from your strange native customs. You have been brought up under some frightful system, where nature is violated. Here among us your true humanity is unfolded, and with Almah you are like the Kosekin. Soon you will learn new lessons, and will find out that there is a new and a final self-abnegation in perfect love; and your love will never rest till you have separated yourself from Almah, so that love can have its perfect work."

The sea now opened wide before us, rising up high as if half-way to the zenith, giving the impression of a vast ascent to endless distances. Around the shores spread themselves, with the shadowy outlines of the mountains; above was the sky, all clear, with faint aurora-flashes and gleaming stars. Hand-in-hand with Almah I stood and pointed out the constellations as we marked them while she told me of the different divisions known among the Kosekin as well as her own people. There, high in the zenith, was the southern polar-star, not exactly at the pole, nor yet of very great brightness, but still sufficiently noticeable.
Looking back, we saw, low down, parts of the Phoenix and the Crane; higher up, the Toucan, Hydrus, and Pavo. On our right, low down, was the beautiful Altar; higher up, the Triangle; while on the left were the Sword-fish and the Flying-fish. Turning to look forward, we beheld a more splendid display. Then, over the bow of the vessel, between the Centaur, which lay low, and Musca Indica, which rose high, there blazed the bright stars of the Southern Cross—a constellation, if not the brightest, at least the most conspicuous and attractive in all the heavens. All around there burned other stars, separated widely. Then, over the stern, gleamed the splendid lustre of Achernar, on the left the brilliant glow of Alpha Robur and Canopus, and low down before us the bright light of Argo. It was a scene full of splendor and fascination. After a time a change came over the sky: the aurora-flashes, at first faint, gradually increased in brilliancy till the stars grew dim, and all the sky, wherever the eye might turn from the horizon to the zenith, seemed filled with lustrous flames of every conceivable hue. Colossal beams radiated from the pole toward the horizon till the central light was dissipated, and there remained encircling us an infinite colonnade of flaming pillars that towered to the stars. These were all in motion, running upon one another, incessantly shifting and changing; new scenes forever succeeded to old; pillars were transformed to pyramids, pyramids to fiery bars; these in their turn were transformed to other shapes, and all the while one tint of innumerable hues overspread the entire circle of the sky.

Our voyage occupied several joms; but our progress was continuous, for different sets of rowers relieved one another at regular intervals. On the second jom a storm broke out. The sky had been gathering clouds during sleeping-time, and when we awoke we found the sea all lashed to fury, while all around the darkness was intense. The storm grew steadily worse; the lightning flashed, the thunder pealed, and at length the sea was so heavy that rowing was impossible. Upon this the oars were all taken in, and the galley lay tossing upon the furious sea, amid waves that continually beat upon her.

And now a scene ensued that filled me with amazement, and took away all my thoughts from the storm. It seemed impossible that so frail a bark could stand the fury of the waves. Destruction was inevitable, and I was expecting to see the usual signs of grief and despair—wondering, too, how these rowers would preserve their subordination. But I had forgotten in my excitement the strange nature of the Kosekin. Instead of terror there was joy, instead of wild despair there was peace and serene delight.

The lightning-flashes revealed a wonderful scene. There were all the rowers, each one upon his seat, and from them all there came forth a chant which was full of triumph, like a song of public welcome to some great national hero, or a song of joy over victory. The officers embraced one another and exchanged words of delight. The Kohen, after embracing all the others, turned to me, and, forgetting my foreign ways, exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiastic delight,

"We are destroyed! Death is near! Rejoice!"

Accustomed as I was to the perils of the sea, I had learned to face death without flinching. Almah, too, was calm, for to her this death seemed preferable to that darker fate which awaited us; but the words of the Kohen jarred upon my feelings.

"Do you not intend to do anything to save the ship?" I asked.

He laughed joyously.

"There's no occasion," said he. "When the oars are taken in we always begin to rejoice. And why not? Death is near—it is almost certain. Why should we do anything to distract our minds and mar our joy? For oh, dear friend, the glorious time has come when we can give up life—life, with all its toils, its burdens, its endless bitternesses, its perpetual evils. Now we shall have no more suffering from vexatious and oppressive riches, from troublesome honors, from a surplus of food, from luxuries and delicacies, and all the ills of life."

"But what is the use of being born at all?" I asked, in a wonder that never ceased to rise at every fresh display of Kosekin feeling.

"The use?" said the Kohen. "Why, if we were not born, how could we know the bliss of dying, or enjoy the sweetness of death? Death is the end of being—the one sweet hope and crown and glory of life, the one desire and hope of every living man. The blessing is denied to none. Rejoice with me, oh Atam-or! you will soon know its blessedness as well as I."

He turned away. I held Almah in my arms, and we watched the storm by the lightning-flashes and waited for the end. But the end came not. The galley was light, broad, and buoyant as a life-boat; at the same time it was so strongly constructed that there was scarcely any twist or contortion in the sinewy fabric. So we floated buoyantly and safely upon the summit of vast waves, and a storm that would have destroyed a ship of the European fashion scarcely injured this in the slightest degree. It was an indestructible as a raft and as buoyant as a bubble; so we rode out the gale, and the death which the Kosekin invoked did not come at all.

The storm was but short-lived; the clouds dispersed, and soon went scudding over the sky; the sea went down. The rowers had to take their oars once more, and the reaction that followed upon their recent rejoicing was visible in
universal gloom and dejection. As the clouds dispersed the aurora lights came out more splendid than ever, and showed nothing but melancholy faces. The rowers pulled with no life or animation; the officers stood about sighing and lamenting; Almah and I were the only ones that rejoiced over this escape from death.

Joms passed. We saw other sights; we met with galleys and saw many ships about the sea. Some were moved by sails only; these were merchant ships, but they had only square sails, and could not sail in any other way than before the wind. Once or twice I caught glimpses of vast shadowy objects in the air. I was startled and terrified; for, great as were the wonders of this strange region, I had not yet suspected that the air itself might have denizens as tremendous as the land or the sea. Yet so it was, and afterward during the voyage I saw them often. One in particular was so near that I observed it with ease. It came flying along in the same course with us, at a height of about fifty feet from the water. It was a frightful monster, with a long body and vast wings like those a bat. Its progress was swift, and it soon passed out of sight. To Almah the monster created no surprise; she was familiar with them, and told me that they were very abundant here, but that they never were known to attack ships. She informed me that they were capable of being tamed if caught when young, though in her country they were never made use of. The name given by the Kosekin to these monsters is athaleb.

At length we drew near to our destination. We reached a large harbor at the end of a vast bay: here the mountains extended around, and before us there arose terrace after terrace of twinkling lights running away to immense distances. It looked like a city of a million inhabitants, though it may have contained far less than that. By the brilliant aurora light I could see that it was in general shape and form precisely like the city that we had left, though far larger and more populous. The harbor was full of ships and boats of all sorts, some lying at the stone quays, others leaving port, others entering. Galleys passed and repassed, and merchant ships with their clumsy sails, and small fishing-boats. From afar arose the deep hum of a vast multitude and the low roar that always ascends from a popular city.

The galley hauled alongside her wharf, and we found ourselves at length in the mighty amir of the Kosekin. The Kohen alone landed; the rest remained on board, and Almah and I with them.

Other galleys were here. On the wharf workmen were moving about. Just beyond were caverns that looked like warehouses. Above these was a terraced street, where a vast multitude moved to and fro—a living tide as crowded and as busy as that in Cheapside.

After what seemed a long time the Kohen returned. This time he came with a number of people, all of whom were in cars drawn by opkuks. Half were men and half women. These came aboard, and it seemed as though we were to be separated; for the women took Almah, while the men took me. Upon this I entreated the Kohen not to separate us. I informed him that we were both of a different race from his, that we did not understand their ways; we should be miserable if separated.

I spoke long and with all the entreaty possible to one with my limited acquaintance with the language. My words evidently impressed them: some of them even wept.

"You make us sad," said the Kohen. "Willingly would we do everything that you bid, for we are your slaves; but the state law prevents. Still, in your case, the law will be modified; for you are in such honor here that you may be considered as beyond the laws. For the present, at least, we cannot separate you."

These words brought much consolation. After this we landed, and Almah and I were still together.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WONDERS OF THE "AMIR"

We were drawn on cars up to the first terraced street, and here we found the vast multitude which we had seen from a distance. Crossing this street, we ascended and came to another precisely like it; then, still going on, we came to a third. Here there was an immense space, not overgrown with trees like the streets, but perfectly open. In the midst arose a lofty pyramid, and as I looked at it I could not refrain from shuddering; for it looked like the public altar, upon which in due time I should be compelled to make my appearance, and be offered up as a victim to the terrific superstitions of the Kosekin.

Crossing this great square, we came to a vast portal, which opened into a cavern with twinkling lights. The city itself extended above this, for we could see the terraced streets rising above our heads; but here our progress ended at the great cavern in the chief square, opposite the pyramid.

On entering the cavern we traversed an antechamber, and then passing on we reached a vast dome, of dimensions so great that I could perceive no end in that gloom. The twinkling lights served only to disclose the darkness and to indicate the immensity of the cavern. In the midst there arose two enormous columns, which were lost in the gloom above.

It was only by passing through this that we learned its great extent. We at length came to the other end, and here we saw numerous passages leading away. The Kohen led us through one of these, and after passing through several other domes of smaller dimensions we at length reached an apartment where we stopped. This place was
furnished with couches and hangings, and lighted with flaming lamps. The light was distressing to those who had accompanied us, and many of them left, while the few who remained had to cover their eyes. Here we found that all preparations had been made. The apartments were all illuminated, though our love of light never ceased to be a matter of amazement to the Kosekin, and a bounteous repast was spread for us. But the Kohen and the others found the light intolerable, and soon left us to ourselves.

After the repast some women appeared to take Almah to her chamber, and, with the usual kindness of the Kosekin, they assured her that she would not be expected to obey the law of separation, but that she was to remain here, where she would be always within reach of me.

After her departure there came to visit me the lowest man in all the land of the Kosekin, though, according to our view, he would be esteemed the highest. This was the Kohen Gadol. His history had already been told me. I had learned that through lack of Kosekin virtue he had gradually sunk to this position, and now was compelled to hold in his hands more wealth, power, and display than any other man in the nation.

He was a man of singular appearance. The light was not so troublesome to him as to the others—he merely kept his eyes shaded; but he regarded me with a keen look of inquiry that was suggestive of shrewdness and cunning. I confess it was with a feeling of relief that I made this discovery; for I longed to find someone among this singular people who was selfish, who feared death, who loved life, who loved riches, and had something in common with me. This I thought I perceived in the shrewd, cunning face of the Kohen Gadol, and I was glad; for I saw that while he could not possibly be more dangerous to me than those self-sacrificing, self-denying cannibals whom I had thus far known, he might prove of some assistance, and might help me to devise means of escape. If I could only find someone who was a coward, and selfish and avaricious—if this Kohen Gadol could but be he—how much brighter my life would be! And so there happened to me an incredible thing, that my highest wish was now to find in the Kohen Gadol cowardice, avarice, and selfishness.

The Kohen was accompanied by a young female, richly attired, who, I afterward learned, was his daughter. Her name was Layelah, and she filled the office of Malca, which signifies queen; and though honorable with us above all, is among the Kosekin the lowest in the land. Layelah was so beautiful that I looked at her in amazement. She was very tall for one of the Kosekin, which made her stature equal to that of an ordinary girl with us; her hair was rich, dark and luxuriant, gathered about her head in great masses and bound by a golden band. Her features were delicate and perfect in their outline; her expression was noble and commanding. Her eyes were utterly unlike those of the other Kosekin; the upper lids had a slight droop, but that was all, and that was the nearest approach to the national blink. Her first entrance into the room seemed to dazzle her, and she shaded her eyes for a few moments, but after that she looked at me fixedly, and seemed to suffer no more inconvenience than I did. The perfect liberty of women among the Kosekin made this visit from her quite as natural as that of her father; and though she said but little on this occasion, she was an attentive listener and close observer.

Their visit was long, for they were evidently full of curiosity. They had heard much about me and wished to see more. It was the first time that I had found among the Kosekin the slightest desire to know where I had come from. Hitherto all had been content with the knowledge that I was a foreigner. Now, however, I found in the Kohen Gadol and Layelah a curiosity that was most eager and intense. They questioned me about my country, about the great world beyond the mountains, about the way in which I had come here, about the manners and customs of my countrymen. They were eager to know about those great nations of which I spoke, who loved light and life; about men who loved themselves better than others; of that world where men feared death and loved life, and sought after riches and lived in the light.

The sleeping-time came and passed, and my visitors were still full of eager questionings. It was Layelah who at last thought of the lateness of the hour. At a word from her the Kohen Gadol rose, with many apologies, and prepared to go. But before he left he said:

"When I was a child I was shipwrecked, and was taken up a ship which conveyed me to a nation beyond the sea. There I grew up to manhood. I learned their language and manners and customs, and when I returned home I found myself an alien here: I do not love darkness or death, I do not hate riches, and the result is that I am what I am. If I were like the rest of my countrymen, my lot would make me miserable; but as it is I prefer it to any other, and consider myself not the lowest but the greatest in the land. My daughter is like me, and instead of being ashamed of her station she is proud of it, and would not give it up even to become a pauper. I will see you again. I have much to say."

With these words the Kohen Gadol retired, followed by Layelah, leaving me more hopeful than I had been for a long time.

For many joms following I received visits from the Kohen Gadol and from Layelah. Almah was with me until sleeping-time, and then these other visitors would come. In this, at least, they resembled the other Kosekin, that they never dreamed of interfering with Almah when she might wish to be with me. Their visits were always long, and we
had much to say; but what I lost of sleep I always made up on the following jom. The Kohen Gadol, with his keen, shrewd face, interested me greatly; but Layelah, with her proud face and air of command, was a positive wonder.

I soon learned that the Kohen Gadol was what we term "a man of advanced views," or perhaps a "Reformer," or a "Philosophic Radical," it matters not which; suffice it to say that his ideas and feelings differed from those of his nation, and if carried out would be equal to a revolution in politics and morals.

The Kohen Gadol advocated selfishness as the true law of life, without which no state can prosper. There were a few of similar views, but they were all regarded with great contempt by the multitude, and had to suffer the utmost rigor of the law; for they were all endowed with vast wealth, compelled to live in the utmost splendor and luxury, to have enormous retinues, and to wield the chief power in politics and in religion. Even this, however, had not changed the sentiments of the condemned, and I learned that they were laboring incessantly, notwithstanding their severe punishment, to disseminate their peculiar doctrines. These were formulated as follows:

1. A man should not love others better than himself. 2. Life is not an evil to be got rid of. 3. Other things are to be preferred to death. 4. Poverty is not the best state for man. 5. Unrequited love is not the greatest happiness. 6. Lovers may sometimes marry. 7. To serve is not more honorable than to command. 8. Defeat is not more glorious than victory. 9. To save a life should not be regarded as a criminal offence. 10. The paupers should be forced to take a certain amount of wealth, to relieve the necessities of the rich.

These articles were considered both by the Kohen Gadol and by Layelah to be remarkable for their audacity, and were altogether too advanced for mention by any except the chosen few. With the multitude he had to deal differently, and had to work his way by concealing his opinions. He had made a great conspiracy, in which he was still engaged, and had gained immense numbers of adherents by allowing them to give him their whole wealth. Through his assistance many Athons and Kohens and Meleks had become artisans laborers, and even paupers; but all were bound by him to the strictest secrecy. If anyone should divulge the secret, it would be ruin to him and to many others; for they would at once be punished by the bestowal of the extremest wealth, by degradation to the rank of rulers and commanders, and by the severest rigors of luxury, power, splendor, and magnificence known among the Kosekin. Overwhelmed thus with the cares of government, crushed under the weight of authority and autocratic rule, surrounded by countless slaves all ready to die for them, their lives would be embittered and their punishment would be more than they could bear. But the philosophic Kohen Gadol dared all these punishments, and pursued his way calmly and pertinaciously.

Nothing surprised the Kohen Gadol so much as the manner in which I received his confidences. He half expected to startle me by his boldness, but was himself confounded by my words. I told him that in my country self was the chief consideration, self-preservation the law of nature; death the King of Terrors; wealth the object of universal search, poverty the worst of evils; unrequited love nothing less than anguish and despair; to command others the highest glory; victory, honor; defeat, intolerable shame; and other things of the same sort, all of which sounded in his ears, as he said, with such tremendous force that they were like peals of thunder. He shook his head despondently; he could not believe that such views as mine could ever be attained to among the Kosekin. But Layelah was bolder, and with all a woman's impetuosity grasped at my fullest meaning and held it firm.

"He is right," said Layelah--"the heaven-born Atam-or. He shall be our teacher. The rich shall be esteemed, the poor shall be down-trodden; to rule over others shall be glorious, to serve shall be base; victory shall be an honor, defeat a shame; selfishness, self-seeking, luxury, and indulgence shall be virtues; poverty, want, and squalor shall be things of abhorrence and contempt."

The face of Layelah glowed with enthusiasm as she said these words, and I saw in her a daring, intrepid, and high-hearted woman, full of a woman's headlong impetuosity and disregard of consequences. In me she saw one who seemed to her like a prophet and teacher of a new order of things, and her whole soul responded to the principles which I announced. It required immense strength of mind and firmness of soul to separate herself from the prevalent sentiment of her nation; and though nature had done much for her in giving her a larger portion of original selfishness than was common to her people, still she was a child of the Kosekin, and her daring was all the more remarkable. And so she went further than her father, and adopted my extreme views when he shrank back, and dared more unfinchingly the extremest rigors of the national law, and all that the Kosekin could inflict in the way of wealth, luxury, supreme command, palatial abodes, vast retinues of slaves, and the immense degradation of the queenly office.

I spoke to her in a warning voice about her rashness.

"Oh," said she, "I have counted the cost, and am ready to accept all that they can inflict. I embrace the good cause, and will not give it up--no, not even if they could increase my wealth a thousand-fold, and sentence me to live a hundred seasons. I can bear their utmost inflictions of wealth, power, magnificence; I could even bear being condemned to live forever in the light. Oh, my friend, it is the conviction of right and the support of conscience that strengthens one to bear the greatest evils that man can inflict."
From these words it was evident to me that Layelah was a true child of the Kosekin; for though she was of advanced sentiments she still used the language of her people, and spoke of the punishments of the law as though they were punishments in reality. Now, to me and to Almah these so-called punishments seemed rewards.

It was impossible for me to avoid feeling a very strong regard for this enthusiastic and beautiful girl; all the more, indeed, because she evinced such an undisguised admiration for me. She evidently considered me some superior being, from some superior race; and although my broken and faulty way of speaking the language was something of a trial, still she seemed to consider every word I uttered as a maxim of the highest wisdom. The tritest of truths, the comonest of platitudes, the most familiar of proverbs or old saws current among us were eagerly seized by Layelah, and accepted as truths almost divine—as new doctrines for the guidance of the human race. These she would discuss with me; she would put them into better and more striking language, and ask for my opinion. Then she would write them down.

For the Kosekin knew the art of writing. They had an alphabet of their own, which was at once simple and very scientific. There were no vowels, but only consonant sounds, the vowels being supplied in reading, just as if one should write the words fthr or dghtr, and read them father and daughter. Their letters were as follows: P, K, T, B, G, D, F, Ch, Th, M, L, N, S, H, R. There were also three others, which have no equivalents in English.

It soon became evident to me that Layelah had a complete ascendancy over her father; that she was not only the Malca of the amir, but the presiding spirit and the chief administrative genius of the whole nation of the Kosekin. She seemed to be a new Semiramis—one who might revolutionize an empire and introduce a new order of things. Such, indeed, was her high ambition, and she plainly avowed it to me; but what was more, she frankly informed me that she regarded me as a Heaven-sent teacher—as one who in this darkness could tell her of the nations of light—who could instruct her in the wisdom of other and greater races, and help her to accomplish her grand designs.

As for Almah, she seemed quite beneath the notice of the aspiring Layelah. She never noticed her, she never spoke of her, and she always made her visits to me after Almah had gone.

CHAPTER XX
THE DARK MAIDEN LAYELAH

Layelah at length began to make pointed remarks about Almah.

"She loves you," said she, "and you love her. How is it that you do not give each other up?"

"I would die rather than give up Almah," said I.

Layelah smiled. "That sounds strange to the Kosekin," said she, "for here to give up your love and to die are both esteemed the greatest possible blessings. But Almah should give you up. It is the women with us who make the beginning. Women generally fall in love first, and it is expected that they will tell their love first. The delicacy of a woman's feelings makes this natural, for if a man tells his love to a woman who does not love him, it shocks her modesty; while if a woman tells a man, he has no modesty to shock."

"That is strange," said I; "but suppose the man does not love the woman?"

"Why, no woman wants to be loved; she only wants to love."

At this I felt somewhat bewildered.

"That," said Layelah, "is unrequited love, which is the chief blessing here, though for my part I am a philosopher, and would wish when I love to be loved in return."

"And then," said I, "if so, would you give up your lover, in accordance with the custom of your country?"

Layelah's dark eyes rested on me for a moment with a glance of intense earnestness and profound meaning. She drew a long breath, and then said, in a low, tremulous voice,

"Never!"

Layelah was constantly with me, and at length used to come at an earlier time, when Almah was present. Her manner toward Almah was full of the usual Kosekin courtesy and gracious cordiality. She was still intent upon learning from me the manners, customs, and principles of action of the race to which I belonged. She had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and her curiosity extended to all of those great inventions which are the wonder of Christendom. Locomotives and steamboats were described to her under the names of "horses of fire" and "ships of fire"; printing was "letters of power"; the electric telegraph, "messages of lightning"; the organ, "lute of giants," and so on. Yet, in spite of the eagerness with which she made her inquiries, and the diligence with which she noted all down, I could see that there was in her mind something lying beneath it all—a far more earnest purpose, and a far more personal one, than the pursuit of useful knowledge.

Layelah was watchful of Almah; she seemed studying her to see how far this woman of another race differed from the Kosekin. She would often turn from me and talk with Almah for a long time, questioning her about her people and their ways. Almah's manner was somewhat reserved, and it was rendered somewhat more so from the fact that her mind was always full of the prospect of our impending doom. Each jom as it came and went brought us nearer to that awful time, and the hour was surely coming when we should be taken to the outer square and to the
top of the pyramid of sacrifice.

Once Layelah sat for some time silent and involved in thought. At length she began to speak to me.

"Almah," said she, "is very different from us. She loves you and you love her. She ought to give you up. Almah, you ought to give up Atam-or, since you love him."

Almah looked confused, and made some reply to the effect that she belonged to a different race with different customs.

"But you should follow our customs. You are one of us now. You can easily find another who will take him."

Almah threw a piteous glance at me and said nothing.

"I," said Layelah, "will take him."

She spoke these words with an air of magnanimity, as though putting it in the light of a favor to Almah; but Almah did not make any reply, and after some silence Layelah spoke of something else.

Not long after we were alone together, and Layelah returned to the subject. She referred to Almah's want of sympathy with the manners of the Kosekin, and asserted that she ought to aim after a separation.

"I love her," said I, with great warmth, "and will never give her up."

"But she must give you up; it is the woman's place to take the first step. I should be willing to take you."

As Layelah said this she looked at me very earnestly, as if anxious to see how I accepted this offer. It was for me a most embarrassing moment. I loved Almah, but Layelah also was most agreeable, and I liked her very much; indeed, so much so that I could not bear to say anything that might hurt her feelings. Among all the Kosekin there was not one who was not infinitely inferior to her in my eyes. Still, I loved Almah, and I told her so again, thinking that in this way I might repel her without giving offence.

But Layelah was quite ready with her reply.

"If you love Almah," said she, "that is the very reason why you should marry me."

This made me feel more embarrassed than ever.

I stammered something about my own feelings--the manners and customs of my race--and the fear that I had of acting against my own principles. "Besides," I added, "I'm afraid it would make you unhappy."

"Oh no," said Layelah, briskly; "on the contrary, it would make me very happy indeed."

I began to be more and more aghast at this tremendous frankness, and was utterly at a loss what to say.

"My father," continued Layelah, "is different from the other Kosekin, and so am I. I seek requital for love, and do not think it an evil."

A sudden thought now suggested itself, and I caught at it as a last resort.

"You have," said I, "some lover among the Kosekin. Why do you not marry him?"

Layelah smiled.

"I have no lover that I love," said she, "among the Kosekin."

My feeble effort was thus a miserable failure. I was about saying something concerning the Kosekin alphabet or something else of an equally appropriate nature, when she prevented me.

"Atam-or," said she, "in a low voice.

"Layelah," said I, with my mind full of confusion.

"I love you!"

She sat looking at me with her beautiful face all aglow her dark eyes fixed on mine with an intense and eager gaze. I looked at her and said not one single word. Layelah was the first to break the awkward silence.

"You love Almah, Atam-or; but say, do you not love me? You smile at me, you meet me always when I come with warm greetings, and you seem to enjoy yourself in my society. Say, Atam-or, do you not love me?"

This was a perilous and a tremendous moment. The fact is, I did like Layelah very much indeed, and I wanted to tell her so; but my ignorance of the language did not allow me to observe those nice distinctions of meaning which exist between the words "like" and "love." I knew no other word than the one Kosekin word meaning "love," and could not think of any meaning "like." It was, therefore, a very trying position for me.

"Dear Layelah," said I, floundering and stammering in my confusion, "I love you; I--"

But here I was interrupted without waiting for any further words; the beautiful creature flung her arms around me and clung to me with a fond embrace. As for me, I was utterly confounded, bewildered, and desperate. I thought of my darling Almah, whom alone I loved. It seemed at that moment as though I was not only false to her, but as if I was even endangering her life. My only thought now was to clear up my meaning.

"Dear Layelah," said I, as I sat with her arms around me, and with my own around her slender waist, "I do not want to hurt your feelings."

"Oh, Atam-or! oh, my love! never, never did I know such bliss as this."

Here again I was overwhelmed, but I still persisted in my effort.

"Dear Layelah," said I, "I love Almah most dearly and most tenderly."
"Oh, Atam-or, why speak of that? I know it well. And so by our Kosekin law you give her up; among us, lovers never marry. So you take me, your own Layelah, and you will have me for your bride; and my love for you is ten thousand times stronger than that of the cold and melancholy Almah. She may marry my papa."

This suggestion filled me with dismay.
"Oh no," said I. "Never, never will I give up Almah!"
"Certainly not," said Layelah; "you do not give her up--she gives you up."
"She never will," said I.
"Oh yes," said Layelah; "I will tell her that you wish it."
"I do not wish it," said I. "I love her, and will never give her up."
"It's all the same," said Layelah. "You cannot marry her at all. No one will marry you. You and Almah are victims and the State has given you the matchless honor of death. Common people who love one another may marry if they choose, and take the punishment which the law assigns but illustrious victims who love cannot marry, and so, my Atam-or, you have only me."

I need not say that all this was excessively embarrassing I was certainly fond of Layelah, and liked her too much to hurt her feelings. Had I been one of the Kosekin I might perhaps have managed better; but being a European, a man of the Aryan race--being such, and sitting there with the beautiful Layelah lavishing all her affections upon me--why, it stands to reason that I could not have the heart to wound her feelings in any way. I was taken at an utter disadvantage. Never in my life had I heard of women taking the initiative. Layelah had proposed to me, she would not listen to refusal, and I had not the heart to wound her. I had made all the fight I could by persisting in asserting my love for Almah, but all my assertions were brushed lightly aside as trivial things.

Let any gentleman put himself in my situation, and ask himself what he would do. What would he do if such a thing could happen to him at home? But there such a thing could not happen, and so there is no use in supposing an impossible case. At any rate I think I deserve sympathy. Who could keep his presence of mind under such circumstances? With us a young lady who loves one man can easily repel another suitor; but here it was very different, for how could I repel Layelah? Could I turn upon her and say "Unhand me"? Could I say "Away! I am another's"? Of course I couldn't; and what's worse, if I had said such things Layelah would have smiled me down into silence. The fact is, it doesn't do for women to take the initiative--it's not fair. I had stood a good deal among the Kosekin. Their love of darkness, their passion for death, their contempt of riches, their yearning after unrequited love, their human sacrifices, their cannibalism, all had more or less become familiar to me, and I had learned to acquiesce in silence; but now when it came to this--that a woman should propose to a man--it really was more than a fellow could stand. I felt this at that moment very forcibly; but then the worst of it was that Layelah was so confoundedly pretty, and had such a nice way with her, that hang me if I knew what to say.

Meanwhile Layelah was not silent; she had all her wits about her.
"Dear papa," said she, "would make such a nice husband for Almah. He is a widower, you know. I could easily persuade him to marry her. He always does whatever I ask him to do."

"But victims cannot marry, you said."
"No," said Layelah, sweetly, "they cannot marry one another, but Almah may marry dear papa, and then you and I can be married, and it will be all very nice indeed.

At this I started away.
"No," said I, indignantly, "it won't be nice. I'm engaged to be married to Almah, and I'm not going to give her up."

"Oh, but she gives you up, you know," said Layelah, quietly.
"Well, but I'm not going to be given up."
"Why, how unreasonable you are, you foolish boy!" said Layelah, in her most caressing manner. "You have nothing at all to do with it."

At this I was in fresh despair, and then a new thought came, which I seized upon.
"See here," said I, "why can't I marry both of you? I'm engaged to Almah, and I love her better than all the world. Let me marry her and you too."

At this Layelah laughed long and merrily. Peal after peal of laughter, musical and most merry, burst from her. It was contagious; I could not help joining in, and so we both sat laughing. It was a long time before we regained our self-control.
"Why, that's downright bigamy!" exclaimed Layelah with fresh laughter. "Why, Atam-or, you're mad!" and so she went off again in fresh peals of laughter. It was evident that my proposal was not at all shocking, but simply comical, ridiculous, and inconceivable in its absurdity. It was to her what the remark of some despairing beauty would be among us who, when pressed by two lovers should express a confused willingness to marry both. It was evident that Layelah accepted it as a ludicrous jest.
Laughter was all very well, of course; but I was serious and felt that I ought not to part with Layelah without some better understanding, and so I once more made an effort.

"All this," said I, in a mournful tone, "is a mere mockery. What have I to say about love and marriage? If you loved me as you say, you would not laugh, but weep. You forget what I am. What am I? A victim, and doomed--doomed to a hideous fate--a fate of horror unutterable. You cannot even begin to imagine the anguish with which I look forward to that fate which impends over me and Almah. Marriage--idle word! What have I to do with marriage? What has Almah? There is only one marriage before us--the dread marriage with death! Why talk of love to the dying? The tremendous ordeal, the sacrifice, is before us and after that there remains the hideous Mista Kosek!"

At this Layelah sprang up, with her whole face and attitude full of life and energy.

"I know, I know," said she, quickly; "I have arranged for all. Your life shall be saved. Do you think that I have consented to your death? Never! You are mine. I will save you. I will show you what we can do. You shall escape."

"Can you really save me?" I cried.

"I can."

"What! in spite of the whole nation?"

Layelah laughed scornfully.

"I can save you," said she. "We can fly. There are other nations beside ours. We can find some land among the Gojin where we can live in peace. The Gojin are not like us."

"But Almah?" said I.

The face of Layelah clouded.

"I can only save you," said she.

"Then I will stay and die with Almah," said I, obstinately.

"What?" said Layelah, "do you not fear death?"

"Of course I do," said I; "but I'd rather die than lose Almah."

"But it's impossible to save both of you."

"Then leave me and save Almah," said I.

"What! would you give up your life for Almah?"

"Yes, and a thousand lives," said I.

"Why," said Layelah, "now you talk just like the Kosekin. You might as well be one of us. You love death for the sake of Almah. Why not be more like the Kosekin, and seek after a separation from Almah?"

Layelah was not at all offended at my declaration of love for Almah. She uttered these words in a lively tone, and then said that it was time for her to go.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FLYING MONSTER

I retired to bed, but could not sleep. The offer of escape filled me with excited thoughts. These made sleep impossible, and as I lay awake I thought that perhaps it would be well to know what might be Layelah's plan of escape, for I might then make use of it to save Almah. I determined to find out all about it on the following jom—to question her as to the lands of the Gojin, to learn all her purpose. It might be that I could make use of that very plan to save Almah; but if not, why then I was resolved to remain and meet my fate with her. If Layelah could be induced to take both of us, I was of course resolved to go, trusting to chance as to the claims of Layelah upon me, and determined at all hazards to be faithful to Almah; but if she should positively refuse to save Almah, then I thought it possible that I might be able to find in Layelah's plan of escape something of which I might avail myself. I could not imagine what it was, but it seemed to me that it might be something quite feasible, especially for a desperate man. The only thought I had was of escape by means of some boat over the seas. In a boat I would be at home. I could make use of a sail so as to elude pursuit, and could guide myself by the stars. The only thing that I wanted to know was the situation of the lands of the Gojin.

On the following jom the Kohen Gadol and Layelah came quite early and spent much time. I was surprised to see the Kohen Gadol devoting himself in an absurd fashion to Almah. It at once occurred to me that Layelah had obtained her father's co-operation in her scheme, and that the old villain actually imagined that he could win the hand of Almah. To Almah herself I had said nothing whatever about the proposal of Layelah, so that she was quite ignorant of the intentions of her companion; but it was excessively annoying to me to see such proceedings going on under my own eyes. At the same time I felt that it would be both unwise and uncivil to interfere; and I was also quite sure that Almah's affections were not to be diverted from me by anyone, much less by such an elderly party as the Kohen Gadol. It was very trying, however, and, in spite of my confidence in Almah, my jealousy was excited, and I began to think that the party of philosophical Radicals were not so agreeable as the orthodox cannibals whom I first met. As for Layelah, she seemed quite unconscious of any disturbance in my mind. She was as amiable, as sprightly,
as inquisitive, and as affectionate as ever. She even outdid herself, and devoted herself to me with an abandon that was quite irresistible.

After Almah had left me, Layelah came again, and this time she was alone.

"I have come," said she, "to show you the way in which we can escape, whenever you decide to do so."

It was the thing above all others which I wished to know, and therefore I questioned her eagerly about it; but to all of my questions she only replied that she would show me, and I might judge for myself.

Layelah led the way, and I followed her. We traversed long galleries and vast halls, all of which were quite empty. It was the sleeping-time, and only those were visible who had some duties which kept them up later than usual. Faint, twinkling lights but feebly illuminated the general gloom. At length we came to an immense cavern, which was darker than ever, and without any lamps at all. Through a vast portal, which was closed with a barred gateway, the beams of the brilliant aurora penetrated and disclosed something of the interior.

Here Layelah stopped and peered through the gloom while I stood waiting by her side, wondering what means of escape could be found in this cavern. As I stood I heard through the still air the sound as of living things. For a time I saw nothing, but at length I descried a vast, shadowy form moving forward toward the portal, where the darkness was less. It was a form of portentous size and fearful shape, and I could not make out at first the nature of it. It surpassed all that I had ever seen. Its head was large and its jaws long, armed with rows of terrible teeth like those of a crocodile. Its body was of great size. It walked on its hind-legs, so as to maintain itself in an upright attitude, and in that position its height was over twelve feet. But the most amazing thing about this monster has yet to be told. As it walked its forearms waved and fluttered, and I saw descending from them what seemed like vast folded leathern wings, which shook and swayed in the air at every step. Its pace was about as fast as that of a man, and it moved with ease and lightness. It seemed like some enormous bat, or rather like a winged crocodile, or yet again like one of those monstrous dragons of which I had read, but in whose actual existence I had never believed.

Yet here I saw one living and moving before me--an actual dragon, with the exception of a tail; for that appendage, which plays so great a part in all the pictures of dragons, had no place here. This beast had but a short caudal appendage, and all its terrors lay in its jaws and in its wings.

For a moment I stood almost lifeless with terror and surprise. Then I shrank back, but Layelah laid her hand on my arm.

"Don't be afraid," said she; "it's only an athaleb."

"But won't it--won't it bite?" I asked, with a shudder.

"Oh no," said Layelah; "it swallows its victuals whole."

At this I shrank away still farther.

"Don't be afraid," said Layelah again. "Its jaws are muzzled, and, besides, it's a tame athaleb. Its jaws are unmuzzled only at feeding-time. But this one is very tame. There are three or four others in here, and all as tame as I am. They all know me. Come up nearer; don't be afraid. These athalebs are easily tamed."

"How can such tremendous monsters be tamed?" I asked, in an incredulous tone.

"Oh, man can tame anything. The athalebs are very docile when they are taken young. They are very long lived. This one has been in service here for a hundred seasons and more."

At this I began to regain my confidence, and as Layelah moved nearer to the athaleb I accompanied her. A nearer view, however, was by no means reassuring. The dragon look of the athaleb was stronger than ever, for I could see that all its body was covered with scales. On its neck and back was a long ridge of coarse hair, and the sweep of its vast arms was enormous. It was with a quaking heart that I stood near; but the coolness of Layelah reassured me, for she went close up, as a boy would go up to a tame elephant, and she stroked his enormous back, and the monster bent down his terrible head and seemed pleased.

"This," said Layelah, "is the way we have of escaping."

"This!" I exclaimed, doubtfully.

"Yes," said she. "He is trained to the service. We can mount on his back, and he will fly with us wherever I choose to guide him."

"What!" I exclaimed, as I shrunk back--"fly! Do you mean to say that you will mount this hideous monster, and trust yourself to him?"

"Certainly," said Layelah, quietly. "He is very docile. There is harness here with which we can guide him. Should you like to see him harnessed?"

"Very much indeed," said I.

Upon this Layelah walked up to the monster and stroked his breast. The huge athaleb at once lay down upon his belly. Then she brought two long straps like reins, and fastened each to the tip of a projecting tip of each wing. Then she fastened a collar around his neck, to which there was attached a grappling-iron.

"We seat ourselves on his back," said Layelah. "I guide with these reins. When we land anywhere I fasten him
with the grapple. He looks dull now, but if I were to open the gate and remove his muzzle he would be off like the wind."

"But can he carry both of us?" I asked.

"Easily," said Layelah. "He can carry three persons without fatigue."

"Could you mount on his back now, and show me how you sit?"

Layelah readily assented, and mounted with the greatest ease, seating herself on the broadest part of the back between the wings.

"Here," said she, "is room for you. Will you not come?"

For an instant I hesitated; but then the sight of her, seated there as coolly as though she were on a chair reassured me, and I climbed up also, though not without a shudder. The touch of the fearful monster was abhorrent but I conquered my disgust and seated myself close behind Layelah. Here she sat, holding the reins in her hands, with the grapple just in front of her; and, seated in this position, she went on to explain the whole process by which the mighty monster was guided through the air.

No sooner had I found myself actually on the back of the athaleb than all fear left me. I perceived fully how completely tame he was, and how docile. The reins attached to his wings could be pulled with the greatest ease, just as one would pull the tiller-ropes of a boat. "Familiarity breeds contempt;" and now, since the first terror had passed away, I felt perfect confidence, and under the encouragement of Layelah I had become like some rustic in a menagerie, who at first is terrified by the sight of the elephant, but soon gains courage enough to mount upon his back. With my new-found courage and presence of mind I listened most attentively to all of Layelah's explanations, and watched most closely the construction and fastening of the harness; for the thought had occurred to me that this athaleb might be of avail in another way—that if I did not fly with Layelah, I might fly with Almah. This thought was only of a vague and shadowy character—a dim suggestion, the carrying out of which I scarce dared to think possible; still, it was in my mind, and had sufficient power over me to make me very curious as to the plans of Layelah. I determined to find out where she proposed to go, and how far; to ask her about the dangers of the way and the means of sustenance. It seemed, I confess, rather unfair to Layelah to find out her plans and use them for another purpose; but then that other purpose was Almah, and to me at that time every device which was for her safety seemed fair and honorable.

"Here," said Layelah—"here, Atam-or, you see the way of escape. The athaleb can carry us both far away to a land where you need never fear that they will put you to death—a land where the people love light and life. Whenever you are ready to go, tell me; if you are ready to go now, say so, and at once I will open the door, and we shall soon be far away."

She laid her hand on mine and looked at me earnestly; but I was not to be beguiled into any hasty committal of myself, and so I turned her proposal away with a question:

"How far is it," I asked, "to that land?"

"It is too far for one flight," said Layelah. "We go first over the sea till we come to a great island, which is called Magones, where there are mountains of fire; there we must rest, and feed the athaleb on fish, which are to be found on the shore. The athaleb knows his way there well, for he goes there once every season for a certain sacred ceremony. He has done this for fifty or sixty seasons, and knows his way there and back perfectly well. The difficulty will be, when we leave Magones, in reaching the land of the Orin."

"The Orin?" I repeated. "Who are they?"

"They are a people among the Gojin who love life and light. It is their land that I wish to reach, if possible."

"Where is it?" I asked, eagerly.

"I cannot explain," said Layelah. "I can only trust to my own skill, and hope to find the place. We may have to pass over different lands of the Gojin, and if so we may be in danger."

"What is the reason why the athaleb goes to Magones every season?" I asked.

"To take there the chief pauper of the season, who has won the prize of death by starvation. It is one of the greatest honors among the Kosekin."

"Is Magones barren?"

"It is an island of fire, without anything on it but craggy mountains and wild rocks and flowing rivers of fire. It stands almost in the middle of the sea."

"How can we get away from here?" I asked, after some silence.

"From here?—why, I open the gates, and the athaleb flies away; that is all."

"But shall we not be prevented?"

"Oh no. No one here ever prevents anyone from doing anything. Everyone is eager to help his neighbor."

"But if they saw me deliberately mounting the athaleb and preparing for flight, would they not stop me?"

"No."
I was amazed at this.
"But," said I, "am I not a victim--preserved for the great sacrifice?"
"You are; but you are free to go where you like, and do what you like. Your character of victim makes you most distinguished. It is the highest honor and dignity. All believe that you rejoice in your high dignity, and no one dreams that you are anxious to escape."
"But if I did escape, would they not pursue me?"
"Certainly not."
"What would they do for a victim?"
"They would wonder at your unaccountable flight, and then choose some distinguished pauper."
"But if I were to stay here, would they not save me from death at my entreaty?"
"Oh, certainly not; they would never understand such an entreaty. That's a question of death, the supreme blessing. No one is capable of such a base act as saving his fellow-man from death. All are eager to help each other to such a fate."
"But if I were to fly they would not prevent me, and they would not pursue me?"
"Oh no."
"Are there any in the land who are exempt from the sacrifice?"
"Oh yes; the Athons, Meleks, and Kohens--these are not worthy of the honor. The artisans and tradesmen are sometimes permitted to attain to this honor; the laborers in greater numbers; but it is the paupers who are chiefly favored. And this is a matter of complaint among the rich and powerful, that they cannot be sacrificed."
"Well, why couldn't I be made an Athon or a Kohen, and be exempted in that way?"
"Oh, that would be too great a dishonor; it would be impossible. On the contrary, the whole people are anxious to honor you to the very uttermost, and to bestow upon you the greatest privileges and blessings which can possibly be given. Oh no, it would be impossible for them to allow you to become an Athon or a Kohen. As for me, I am Malca, and therefore the lowest in the land--pitied and commiserated by the haughty pauper class, who shake their heads at the thought of one like me. All the people shower upon me incessantly new gifts and new offices. If my present love of light and life were generally known, they would punish me by giving me new contributions of wealth and new offices and powers, which I do not want."
"But you love riches, do you not? and you must want them still?"
"No," said Layelah, "I do not want them now."
"Why, what do you want?" I asked.
"You!" said she, with a sweet smile.
I said nothing, but tried desperately to think of something that might divert the conversation.
Layelah was silent for a few moments, and then went on in a musing tone:
"As I was saying, I love you, Atam-or, and I hate Almah because you love her. I think Almah is the only human being in all the world that I ever really hated; and yet, though I hate her, still, strange to say, I feel as though I should like to give her the immense blessing of death, and that is a very strange feeling, indeed, for one of the Kosekin. Do you understand, Atam-or, what such can possibly be?"
I did not answer, but turned away the conversation by a violent effort.
"Are there any other athalebs here?"
"Oh yes."
"How many?"
"Four."
"Are they all as tame as this?"
"Oh yes, all quite as tame; there is no difference whatever."
Upon this I left the back of the athaleb, and Layelah also descended, after which she proceeded to show me the other monsters. At length she unharnessed the athaleb and we left the cavern.
CHAPTER XXII
ESCAPE
On the following jom I told everything to Almah. I told her that Layelah was urging me to fly with her, and that I had found out all about her plans. I described the athalebs, informed her about the direction which we were to take, the island of fire, and the country of the Orin. At this intelligence Almah was filled with delight, and for the first time since we had come to the amir there were smiles of joy upon her face. She needed no persuasion. She was ready to set forth whenever it was fitting, and to risk everything upon this enterprise. She felt as I did, and thought that the wildest attempt was better than this dull inaction.
Death was before us here, and every jom as it passed only brought it nearer. True, we were treated with the utmost kindness, we lived in royal splendor, we had enormous retinues; but all this was a miserable mockery, since
it all served as the prelude to our inevitable doom. For that doom it was hard indeed to wait. Anything was better.

Far better would it be to risk all the dangers of this unusual and amazing flight, to brave the terrors of that drear isle of fire, Magones; better to perish there of starvation, or to be killed by the hands of hostile Gojin, than to wait here and be destroyed at last by the sacrificial knife of these smiling, generous, kind-hearted, self-sacrificing fiends; to be killed—ay, and afterward borne to the tremendous Misti Kosek.

There was a difficulty with Layelah that had to be guarded against: in the first place that she might not suspect, and again that we might choose our time of escape when she would not be at all likely to find us out. We resolved to make our attempt without any further delay. Layelah was with us for the greater part of that jom, and the Kohen Gadol also gave us much of his company. Layelah did not seem to have any suspicions whatever of my secret purpose; for she was as bright, as amiable, and as devoted to me as ever, while the Kohen Gadol sought as before to make himself agreeable to Almah. I did not think fit to tell her about Layelah's proposal, and therefore she was quite ignorant of the secret plans of the Kohen Gadol, evidently attributing his attention to the unfailing amiability of the Kosekin.

Layelah came again after Almah had retired, and spent the time in trying to persuade me to fly with her. The beautiful girl was certainly never more engaging, nor was she ever more tender. Had it not been for Almah it would have been impossible to resist such sweet persuasions; but as it was I did resist. Layelah, however, was not at all discouraged, nor did she lose any of her amiability; but when she took leave it was with a smile and sweet words of forgiveness on her lips for what she called my cruelty. After she left I remained for a time with a painful sense of helplessness. The fact is my European training did not fit me for encountering such a state of things as existed among the Kosekin. It's very easy to be faithful to one's own true-love in England, when other fair ladies hold aloof and wait to be sought; but here among the Kosekin, women have as much liberty in making love as men, and there is no law or custom about it. If a woman chooses she can pay the most desperate attentions, and play the part of a distracted lover to her heart's content. If a woman chooses she can pay the most desperate attentions, and play the part of a distracted lover to her heart's content. In most cases the women actually take the initiative, as they are more impressionable and impulsive than men; and so it was that Layelah made me the object of her persistent assault—acting all the time, too, in accordance with the custom of the country, and thus having no thought whatever of indelicacy, since, according to the Kosekin, she was acting simply in accordance with the rights of every woman. Now, where a woman is urged by one ardent lover to dismiss her other lover, she may sometimes find it difficult to play her part satisfactorily; but in my case I did not play my part satisfactorily at all; the ordeal was too hard, and I was utterly unable to show to Layelah that firmness and decision of character which the occasion demanded.

Yet, after all, the ordeal at last ended. Layelah left, as I have said, with sweet words of forgiveness on her lips, and I after a time succeeded in regaining my presence of mind.

Almah was waiting, and she soon joined me. We gathered a few articles for the journey, the chief of which were my rifle and pistol, which I had not used here, and then we set forth. Leaving our apartments we traversed the long passages, and at length came to the cavern of the athalebs. We met several people on the way, who looked at us with smiles, but made no other sign. It was evident that they had no commission to watch us, and that thus far Layelah's information was correct.

Upon entering the cavern of the athalebs my first feeling was one of helplessness; for I had no confidence whatever in my own powers of managing these awful monsters, nor did I feel sure that I could harness them; but the emergency was a pressing one, and there was no help for it. I had seen where Layelah had left the harness, and now my chief desire was to secure one of the athalebs. The faint light served to disclose nothing but gloom; and I waited for a while, hoping that one of them would come forward as before. But waiting did no good, for no movement was made, and I had to try what I could do myself to rouse them. So I walked farther in toward the back part of the cavern, peering through the gloom, while Almah remained near the entrance.

As I advanced I heard a slight noise, as of someone moving. I thought it was one of the athalebs, and walked on farther, peering through the gloom, when suddenly I came full upon a man who was busy at some work which I could not make out. For a moment I stood in amazement and despair, for it seemed as though all was lost, and as if this man would at once divine my intent. While I stood thus he turned and gave me a very courteous greeting, after which, in the usual manner of the Kosekin, he asked me with much amiability what he could do for me.

He went on to say that he had recently been raised from the low position of Athon to that of Feeder of the Athalebs, a post involving duties like those of ostlers or grooms among us, but which here indicated high rank and honor. He was proud of his title of "Epet," which means servant, and more than usually obliging. I at once took advantage of his complaisance, and requested him to show me the athalebs. Upon this he led the way farther on, where I could see through the gloom the shadowy outlines of four monsters, all of which were resting in an upright posture against the wall, with their claws fixed on a shelf of rock. They looked more than ever like dragons, or rather like enormous bats, for their wings were disclosed hanging in loose leathern folds.
"Can they be roused," I asked, "and made to move?"

"Oh yes," said the Epet, and without waiting for any further request he proceeded to pull at the loose fan-like wing of the nearest one. The monster drew himself together, gave a flutter with his wings, and then moved back from the wall.

"Make him walk," said I, eagerly. The Epet at this pulled upon his wing once more, and the athaleb moved forward. "Bring him to the portal, so that I may see him," said I. The Epet, still holding the athaleb's wing, pulled at him, and thus guided him toward the portal. I was amazed at the docility of this terrific monster; yet, after all, I thought that it was no more astonishing than the docility of the elephant, which in like manner allows itself to be guided by the slightest pressure. A child may lead a vast elephant with ease, and here with equal ease the Epet led the athaleb. He led him up near to the portal, where the aurora light beamed through far brighter than the brightest moon, and disclosed all the vast proportions of the monster. I stood and looked on for some time in silence, quite at a loss what to do next.

And now Layelah's words occurred to me as to the perfect willingness of the Kosekin to do anything which one might wish. She had insisted on it that they would not prevent our flight, and had given me to understand that they would even assist me if I should ask them. This is what now occurred to me, and I determined to make a trial. So I said:

"I should like to fly in the air on the athaleb. Will you harness him?"

I confess it was with some trepidation that I said this, but the feeling was soon dissipated. The Epet heard my words with perfect coolness, as though they conveyed the most natural request in the world, and then proceeded to obey me, just as at home a servant might hear and obey his master, who might say, "I should like to take a ride; will you harness the bay mare?"

So the Epet proceeded to harness the athaleb, and I watched him in silence; but it was the silence of deep suspense, and my heart throbbed painfully. There was yet much to be risked. The gates had to be opened. Others might interfere. Layelah might come. All these thoughts occurred to me as I watched the Epet; and though the labor of harnessing the athaleb was simple and soon performed, still the time seemed long. So the collar was secured around the neck of the athaleb, with the grapple attached, and the lines were fastened to the wings, and then Almah and I mounted.

The Epet now stood waiting for further orders. "Open the gates," said I. The Epet did so. Almah was seated on the back of the athaleb before me, holding on to the coarse mane; I, just behind, held the reins in my hand. The gates were opened wide. A few people outside, roused by the noise of the opening gates, stood and looked on. They had evidently no other feeling but curiosity.

All was now ready and the way was open, but there was an unexpected difficulty--the athaleb would not start, and I did not know how to make him. I had once more to apply for help to the Epet. "How am I to make him start?" I asked. "Pull at the collar to make him start, and pull at both reins to make him stop," said the Epet. Upon this I pulled at the collar. The athaleb obeyed at once. He rose almost erect, and moved out through the gate. It was difficult to hold on, but we did so. On reaching the terrace outside, the athaleb expanded his vast wings, which spread out over a space of full fifty feet, and then with vigorous motions raised himself in the air.

It was a moment full of terror to both of us; the strange sensation of rising in the air, the quivering muscles of the athaleb at the working of the enormous pinions, the tremendous display of strength, all combined to overwhelm me with a sense of utter helplessness. With one hand I clung to the stiff mane of the monster; with the other I held Almah, who was also grasping the athaleb's hair; and thus for some time all thought was taken up in the one purpose of holding on. But at length the athaleb lay in the air in a perfectly horizontal position; the beat of the wings grew more slow and even, the muscular exertion more steady and sustained. We both began to regain some degree of confidence, and at length I raised myself up and looked around.

It did not seem long since we had left; but already the city was far behind, rising with its long, crescent terraces, sparkling and twinkling with innumerable lights. We had passed beyond the bay; the harbor was behind us, the open sea before us, the deep water beneath. The athaleb flew low, not more than a hundred feet above the water, and maintained that distance all the time. It seemed, indeed, as if he might drop into the water at any time; but this was only fancy, for he was perfect master of all his movement and his flight was swift and well sustained.

Overhead the sky was filled with the glory of the aurora beams, which spread everywhere, flashing out from the zenith and illuminating the earth with a glow brighter than that of the brightest moon; beneath, the dark waters of...
the sea extended, with the waves breaking into foam, and traversed by galleys, by merchant-ships, and by the navies of the Kosekin. Far away the surface of the sea spread, with that marvellous appearance of an endless ascent, as though for a thousand miles, rising thus until it terminated half-way up the sky; and so it rose up on every side, so that I seemed to be at the bottom of a basin-shaped world—an immense and immeasurable hollow—a world unparalleled and unintelligible. Far away, at almost infinite distances, arose the long lines of mountains, which, crowned with ice, gleamed in the aurora light, and seemed like a barrier that made forever impossible all ingress and egress.

On and on we sped. At length we grew perfectly accustomed to the situation, the motion was so easy and our seats were so secure. There were no obstacles in our way, no roughness along our path; for that pathway was the smooth air, and in such a path there could be no interruption, no jerk or jar. After the first terror had passed there remained no longer any necessity for holding on—we could sit and look around with perfect freedom; and at length I rose to my feet, and Almah stood beside me, and thus we stood for a long time, with all our souls kindled into glowing enthusiasm by the excitement of that adventurous flight, and the splendors of that unequalled scene.

At length the aurora light grew dim. Then came forth the stars, glowing and burning in the black sky. Beneath there was nothing visible but the darkness of the water, spotted with phosphorescent points, while all around a wall of gloom arose which shut out from view the distant shores.

Suddenly I was aware of a noise like the beat of vast wings, and these wings were not those of our athaleb. At first I thought it was the fluttering of a sail, but it was too regular and too long continued for that. At length I saw through the gloom a vast shadowy form in the air behind us, and at once the knowledge of the truth flashed upon me. It was another monster flying in pursuit!

Were we pursued? Were there men on his back? Should I resist? I held my rifle poised, and was resolved to resist at all hazards. Almah saw it all, and said nothing. She perceived the danger, and in her eyes I saw that she, like me, would prefer death to surrender. The monster came nearer and nearer, until at last I could see that he was alone, and that none were on his back. But now another fear arose. He might attack our athaleb, and in that way endanger us. He must be prevented from coming nearer; yet to fire the rifle was a serious matter. I had once before I earned the danger of firing under such circumstances, when my opmahera had fled in terror at the report, and did not wish to experience the danger which might arise from a panic-stricken athaleb; and so as I stood there I waved my arms and gesticulated violently. The pursuing athaleb seemed frightened at such an unusual occurrence, for he veered off, and soon was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII
THE ISLAND OF FIRE

At last there appeared before us what seemed like a long line of dull-red fires, and as we looked we could see bursts of flame at fitful intervals, which shone out for a few moments and then died away. Upon this now our whole attention was fixed; for it seemed as though we were approaching our destination, and that this place was the Island of Fire—a name which, from present appearances, was fully justified. As we went on and drew steadily nearer, the mass of glowing fire grew larger and brighter, and what at first had seemed a line was broken up into different parts, one of which far surpassed the others. This was higher in the air, and its shape was that of a long, thin, sloping line, with a burning, glowing globule at each end. It seemed like lava running down from the crater of a volcano, and this appearance was made certainty on a nearer approach; for we saw at the upper point, which seemed the crater, an outburst of flame, followed by a new flow of the fiery stream. In other places there were similar fires, but they were less bright, either because they were smaller or more remote.

At length we heard beneath us the roar of breakers, and saw long white lines of surf beating upon the shore. Our athaleb now descended and alighted; we clambered to the ground, and I, taking the grapple, fixed it securely between two sharp rocks. We were at last on Magones, the Island of Fire.

The brightness of the aurora light had left us, but it needed not this to show us the dismal nature of the land to which we had come. It was a land of horror, where there was nothing but the abomination of desolation—a land overthrown with blasted fragments of fractured lava-blocks, intermixed with sand, from which there arose black precipices and giant mountains that poured forth rivers of fire and showers of ashes and sheets of flame. A tremendous peak arose before us, with a crest of fire and sides streaked with red torrents of molten lava; between us and it there spread away a vast expanse of impassable rocks—a scene of ruin and savage wildness which cannot be described, and all around was the same drear and appalling prospect. Here in the night-season—the season of darkness and of awful gloom—we stood in this land of woe; and not one single sign appeared of life save the life that we had brought with us. As for food, it was vain to think of it. To search after it would be useless. It seemed, indeed, impossible to move from the spot where we were. Every moment presented some new discovery which added to the horror of Magones.

But Almah was weary, for our flight had been long, and she wished to rest. So I found a place for her where
there was some sand between two rocks, and here she lay down and went to sleep. I sat at a little distance off on a
shelf of the rock, with my back against it, and here, after a little time, I also went to sleep.

At length we awoke. But what a waking! There was no morning dawn, no blessed returning light to greet our
eyes. We opened our eyes to the same scenes upon which we had closed them, and the darkness was still deep and
dense around us. Over us both there was a sense of utter depression, and I was so deeply plunged into it that I found
it impossible to rouse myself, even for the sake of saying words of cheer to Almah. I had brought a few fragments of
food, and upon these we made our breakfast; but there was the athaleb to feed, and for him I found nothing, nor
could I think of anything—unless he could feed upon rocks and sand. Yet food for him was a matter of the highest
consequence, for he was all our support and stay and hope; and if the monster were deprived of food he might turn
upon us and satisfy upon us his ravenous appetite; these thoughts were painful indeed, and added to my
despondency.

Suddenly I heard the sound of running water. I started away toward the place from which the sound came, and
found, only a little distance off, a small brook trickling along on its way to the shore. I called Almah, and we both
drank and were refreshed.

This showed an easy way to get to the shore, and I determined to go there to see if there were any fish to be
found. Shell-fish might be there, or the carcasses of dead fish thrown up by the sea, upon which the athaleb might
feed. I left my pistol with Almah, telling her to fire it if she heard me fire, for I was afraid of losing my way, and
therefore took this precaution. I left it lying on the rock full-cocked, and directed her to point it in the air and pull the
trigger. It was necessary to take these precautions, as of course she was quite ignorant of its nature. After this I left
her and tried to follow the torrent.

This, however, I soon found to be impossible, for the brook on reaching a huge rock plunged underneath it and
became lost to view. I then went toward the shore as well as I could—now climbing over sharp rocks, now going
round them, until at length after immense labor I succeeded in reaching the water. Here the scene was almost as wild
as the one I had left. There was no beach whatever—nothing but a vast extent of wild fragments of fractured lava-
blocks, which were evidently the result of some comparatively recent convulsion of nature, for their edges were still
sharp, and the water had not worn even those which were within its grasp to anything like roundness, or to anything
else than the jagged and shattered outlines which had originally belonged to them. All the shore thus consisted of
vast rocky blocks, over which the sea beat in foam.

Eager to find something, I toiled along this rocky shore for a long distance, but without seeing any change. I
was unwilling to go back baffled, yet I was at length compelled to do so. But the necessity of feeding the athaleb
was pressing, and I saw that our only course now would be to mount him again, leave this place, and seek some
other. But where could we go? That I could not imagine, and could only conclude to trust altogether to the instinct of
the athaleb, which might guide him to places where he might obtain food. Such a course would involve great risk for
we might be carried into the midst of vast flocks of these monsters; yet there was nothing else to be done.

I now retraced my steps, and went for a long time near the sea. At length I found a place where the walking was
somewhat easier, and went in this way up into the island and away from the sea. It seemed to lead in the direction
where I wished to go. At length it seemed as if I had walked far enough, yet I could see no signs of Almah. I
shouted, but there was no answer. I shouted again and again, but with the like result. Then I fired my rifle and
listened. In response there came the report of the pistol far away behind me. It was evident that in coming back
along the shore I had passed by the place where Almah was. There was nothing now left but to retrace my steps and
this I accordingly did. I went back to the shore, and returned on my steps, shouting all the time, until at length I was
rejoiced to hear the answering shout of Almah. After this it was easy to reach her.

We now took up the grapple and once more mounted. The athaleb, eager to be off, raised himself quickly in the
air, and soon our late resting-place was far behind. His flight was now different from what it was before. Then he
stood off in one straight line for a certain fixed destination, as though under some guidance; for though I did not
direct him, still his long training had taught him to fly to Magones. But now training and guidance were both
wanting, and the athaleb was left to the impulse of his hunger and the guidance of his instinct; so he flew no longer
in one undeviating straight line, but rose high, and bent his head down low, and flew and soared in vast circles, even
as I have seen a vulture or a condor sweep about while searching for food. All the while we were drawing farther
and farther away from the spot which we had left.

We passed the lofty volcano; we saw more plainly the rivers of molten lava; we passed vast cliffs and bleak
mountains, all of which were more terrific than all that we had left behind. Now the darkness lessened, for the aurora
was brightening in the sky, and gathering up swiftly and gloriously all its innumerable beams, and flashing forth its
lustrous glow upon the world. To us this was equal to the return of day; it was like a blessed dawn. Light had come,
and we rejoiced and were exceeding glad.

Now we saw before us, far beyond the black precipices, a broad bay with sloping shores, and a wide beach
which seemed like a beach of sand. The surf broke here, but beyond the surf was the gentle sandy declivity, and beyond this there appeared the shores, still rocky and barren and desolate, but far preferable to what we had left behind. Far away in the interior arose lofty mountains and volcanoes, while behind us flamed the burning peak which we had passed.

Here the athaleb wheeled in long, circuitous flights, which grew lower and lower, until at length he descended upon the sandy beach, where I saw a vast sea-monster lying dead. It had evidently been thrown up here by the sea. It was like one of those monsters which I had seen from the galley of the Kohen at the time of the sacred hunt. By this the athaleb descended, and at once began to devour it, tearing out vast masses of flesh, and exhibiting such voracity and strength of jaw that I could scarcely bear to look upon the sight. I fastened the grapple securely to the head of the dead monster, and leaving the athaleb to feed upon it, Almah and I went up the beach.

On our way we found rocks covered with sea-weed, and here we sought after shell-fish. Our search was at length rewarded, for suddenly I stumbled upon a place where I found some lobsters. I grasped two of these, but the others escaped. Here at last I had found signs of life, but they were of the sea rather than of the shore. Delighted with my prey, I hastened to Almah to show them to her. She recognized them at once, and I saw that they were familiar to her. I then spoke of eating them, but at this proposal she recoiled in horror. She could not give any reason for her repugnance, but merely said that among her people they were regarded as something equivalent to vermin, and I found that she would no more think of eating one than I would think of eating a rat. Upon this I had to throw them away, and we once more resumed our search.

At last we came to a place where numbers of dead fish lay on the sand. Nearer the water they were more fresh, and not at all objectionable. I picked up a few which looked like our common smelt, and found that Almah had no objection to these. But now the question arose how to cook them; neither of us could eat them raw. A fire was necessary, yet a fire was impossible; for on the whole island there was probably not one single combustible thing. Our discovery, therefore, seemed to have done us but little good, and we seemed destined to starvation, when fortunately a happy thought suggested itself. In walking along I saw far away the glow of some lava which had flowed to the shore at the end of the sandy beach, and was probably cooling down at the water's edge. Here, then, was a natural fire, which might serve us better than any contrivance of our own, and toward this we at once proceeded. It was about two miles away; but the beach was smooth, and we reached the place without any difficulty.

Here we found the edge of that lava flood which seemed eternally descending from the crater beyond. The edge which was nearest the water was black; and the liquid fire, as it rolled down, curled over this in a fantastic shape, cooling and hardening into the form which it thus assumed. Here, after some search, I found a crevice where I could approach the fire, and I laid the fish upon a crimson rock, which was cooling and hardening into the shape of a vast ledge of lava. In this way, by the aid of nature, the fish were broiled, and we made our repast.

There was nothing here to invite a longer stay, and we soon returned to the athaleb. We found the monster, gorged with food, asleep, resting upon his hind legs, with his breast supported against the vast carcass. Almah called it a jantannin. It was about sixty feet in length and twenty in thickness, with a vast horny head, ponderous jaws, and back covered with scales. Its eyes were of prodigious size, and it had the appearance of a crocodile, with the vast size of a whale. It was unlike a crocodile, however; for it had fins rather than paws, and must have been as clumsy on the land as a seal or a walrus. It lay on its side, and the athaleb had fed itself from the uncovered flesh of its belly.

There was nothing here to induce us to stay, and so we wandered along the beach in the other direction. On our right was the bay; on our left the rocky shore, which, beginning at the beach, ran back into the country, a waste of impassable rocks, where not a tree or plant or blade of grass relieved the appalling desolation. Once or twice we made an attempt to penetrate into the country, where openings appeared. These openings seemed like the beds of dried-up torrents. We were able to walk but a few paces for invariably we would come to some immense blocks of rock, which barred all farther progress. In this way we explored the beach for miles, until it terminated in a savage promontory that rose abruptly from the sea against which the huge billows broke in thunder.

Then we retraced our steps, and again reached the spot where the athaleb was asleep by the jantannin. Almah was now too weary to walk any farther, nor was it desirable to do so; for, indeed, we had traversed all that could be visited. On one side of the beach was the sea, on the other the impassable rocks; at one end the promontory, at the other the lava fires. There was nothing more for us to do but to wait here until the athaleb should awake, and then our actions would depend upon what we might now decide.

This was the question that was now before us, and this we began to consider. We both felt the most unspeakable aversion for the island, and to remain here any longer was impossible. We would once more have to mount the athaleb, and proceed to some other shore. But where? Ah! there was the question! Not on the island, for it did not seem possible that in all its extent there could be one single spot capable of affording a resting-place. Layelah's information with regard to Magones had made that much plain. I had not taken in her full meaning, but now mine eyes had seen it. Yet where else could we go? Almah could not tell where under the sky lay that land.
which she loved; I could not guess where to go to find the land of the Orin. Even if I did know, I did not feel able to
guide the course of the athaleb; and I felt sure that if we were to mount again, the mighty monster would wing his
flight back to the very place from which we had escaped--the amir. These thoughts weighed down our spirits. We
felt that we had gained nothing by our flight, and that our future was dark indeed. The only hope left us was that we
might be able to guide the course of the athaleb in some different direction altogether, so that we should not be
carried back to the Kosekin.

And now, worn out by the long fatigues of this jom, we thought of sleep. Almah lay down upon the sand, and I
seated myself, leaning against a rock, a little distance off, having first reloaded my rifle and pistol.

CHAPTER XXIV
RECAPTURE

How long I slept I do not know; but in the midst of my sleep there sounded voices, which at first intermingled
themselves with my dreams, but gradually became separate and sounded from without, rousing me from my
slumber. I opened my eyes drowsily, but the sight that I saw was so amazing that in an instant all sleep left me. I
started to my feet, and gazed in utter bewilderment upon the scene before me.

The aurora light was shining with unusual brilliancy, and disclosed everything--the sea, the shore, the athaleb,
the jantannin, the promontory, all--more plainly and more luminously than before; but it was not any of these things
that now excited my attention and rendered me dumb. I saw Almah standing there at a little distance, with despairing
face, surrounded by a band of armed Kosekin; while immediately before me, regarding me with a keen glance and
an air of triumph, was Layelah.

"Ataesmzori alonla," said she, with a sweet smile, giving me the usual salutation of the Kosekin.
I was too bewildered to say a word, and stood mute as before, looking first at her and then at Almah.

The sight of Almah a prisoner once more, surrounded by the Kosekin, excited me to madness. I seized my rifle,
and raised it as if to take aim; but Almah, who understood the movement, cried to me:

"Put down your sepet-ram, Atam-or! you can do nothing for me. The Kosekin are too numerous."

"Sepet-ram!" said Layelah; "what do you mean by that? If your sepet-ram has any power, do not try to use it,
Atam-or, or else I shall have to order my followers to give to Almah the blessing of death."

At this my rifle was lowered: the whole truth flashed upon me, and I saw, too, the madness of resistance. I
might kill one or two, but the rest would do as Layelah said, and I should speedily be disarmed. Well I knew how
powerless were the thunders of my fire-arms to terrify these Kosekin; for the prospect of death would only rouse
them to a mad enthusiasm, and they would all rush upon me as they would rush upon a jantannin--to slay and be
slain. The odds were too great. A crowd of Europeans could be held in check far more easily than these death-loving
Kosekin. The whole truth was thus plain: we were prisoners, and were at their mercy.

Layelah showed no excitement or anger whatever. She looked and spoke in her usual gracious and amiable
fashion, with a sweet smile on her face.

"We knew," said she, "that you would be in distress in this desolate place, and that you would not know where
to go from Magones; and so we have come, full of the most eager desire to relieve your wants. We have brought
with us food and drink, and are ready to do everything for you that you may desire. We have had great trouble in
finding you, and have coursed over the shores for vast distances, and far over the interior, but our athalebs found you
at last by their scent. And we rejoice to have found you in time, and that you are both so well, for we have been
afraid that you had been suffering. Nay, Atam-or, do not thank us; thanks are distasteful to the Kosekin: these brave
followers of mine will all be amply rewarded for this, for they will all be made paupers; but as for myself, I want no
higher reward than the delightful thought that I have saved you from suffering."

The beautiful, smiling Layelah, who addressed me in this way with her sweet voice, was certainly not to be
treated as an enemy. Against her a rifle could not be levelled; she would have looked at me with the same sweet
smile, and that smile would have melted all my resolution. Nor could I even persist in my determination to remain.
Remain! For what? For utter despair! And yet where else could we go?

"You do not know where lie the lands of the Orin," said Layelah. "The athaleb does not know. You could not
guide him if you did know. You are helpless on his back. The art of driving an athaleb is difficult, and cannot be
learned without long and severe practice. My fear was that the athaleb might break away from you and return,
leaving you to perish here. Had you tried to leave this place he would have brought you back to the amir."

To this I said nothing--partly because it was so true that I had no answer to make, and partly also out of deep
mortification and dejection. My pride was wounded at being thus so easily baffled by a girl like Layelah, and all my
grief was stirred by the sadness of Almah. In her eyes there seemed even now the look of one who sees death
inevitable, and the glance she gave to me was like an eternal farewell.

Almah now spoke, addressing herself to Layelah.

"Death," said she, in a voice of indescribable mournfulness, "is better here than with you. We would rather die
here than go back. Let us, I pray you, receive the blessing of death here. Let us be paupers and exiles, and die on Magones."

Layelah heard this, and stood for a moment in deep thought.

"No one but a stranger," said she at length, "would ask such a favor as that. Do you not know that what you ask is among the very highest honors of the Kosekin? Who am I that I can venture to grant such a request as that? Ask for anything in my power, and I will be glad to grant it. I have already arranged that you shall be separated from Atam-or; and that, surely, is a high privilege. I might consent to bind you hand and foot, after the manner of the more distinguished Asirin; you may also be blindfolded if you wish it. I might even promise, after we return to the amir, to keep you confined in utter darkness, with barely sufficient food to keep you alive until the time of the sacrifice; in short, there is no blessing known among the Kosekin that I will not give so long as it is in my power. And so, beloved Almah," continued Layelah, "you have every reason for happiness; you have all the highest blessings known among the Kosekin: separation from your lover, poverty, want, darkness; and, finally, the prospect of inevitable death ever before you as the crowning glory of your lot."

These words seemed to the Kosekin the very excess of magnanimity, and involuntary murmurs of admiration escaped them; although it is just possible that they murmurred at the greatness of the favor that was offered. But to me it sounded like fiendish mockery, and to Almah it sounded the same; for a groan escaped her, her fortitude gave way, she sank on her knees, buried her head in her hands, and wept.

"Almah," cried I, in a fury, "we will not go back--we will not be separated! I will destroy all the athalebs, and we shall all perish here together. At least, you and I will not be separated."

At this Almah started up.

"No, no," said she--"no; let us go back. Here we have nothing but death."

"But we have death also at the amir, and a more terrible one," said I.

"If you kill the athalebs," said Layelah, "I will give Almah the blessing of death."

At this I recoiled in horror, and my resolution again gave way.

"You have some mysterious power of conferring death," continued Layelah, "with what Almah calls your sepet-ram; but do not kill the athalebs, for it will do you no good. Almah would then receive the blessing of death. My followers, these noble Kosekin, would rejoice in thus gaining exile and death on Magones. As for myself, it would be my highest happiness to be here alone with you. With you I should live for a few sweet joms, and with you I should die; so go on--kill the athalebs if you wish."

"Do not!" cried Almah--"do not! There is no hope. We are their prisoners, and our only hope is in submission."

Upon this all further thought of resistance left me, and I stood in silence, stolidly waiting for their action. As I looked around I noticed a movement near the jantannin, and saw several athalebs there, which were devouring its flesh. I now went over to Almah and spoke with her. We were both full of despair. It seemed as though we might never meet again. We were to be separated now; but who could say whether we should be permitted to see each other after leaving this place? We had but little to say. I held her in my arms, regardless of the presence of others; and these, seeing our emotion, at once moved away, with the usual delicacy of the Kosekin, and followed Layelah to the jantannin to see about the athalebs.

At last our interview was terminated. Layelah came and informed us that all was ready for our departure. We walked sadly to the place, and found the athalebs crouched to receive their riders. There were four beside ours. Layelah informed me that I was to go with her, and Almah was to go on another athaleb. I entreated her to let Almah go with me; but she declined, saying that our athaleb could only carry two, as he seemed fatigued, and it would not be safe to overload him for so long a flight. I told her that Almah and I could go together on the same athaleb; but she objected on the ground of my ignorance of driving. And so, remonstrances and objections being alike useless, I was compelled to yield to the arrangements that had been made. Almah mounted on another athaleb. I mounted with Layelah, and then the great monsters expanded their mighty wings, rose into the air, and soon were speeding over the waters.

We went on in silence for some time. I was too despondent to say a word, and all my thoughts turned toward Almah, who was now separated from me--perhaps forever. The other athalebs went ahead, at long intervals apart, flying in a straight line, while ours was last. Layelah said nothing. She sat in front of me; her back was turned toward me; she held in her hands the reins, which hung quite loose at first, but after a while she drew them up, and seemed to be directing our course. For some time I did not notice anything in particular, for my eyes were fixed upon the athaleb immediately before us, upon which was seated the loved form of Almah, which I could easily recognize. But our athaleb flew slowly, and I noticed that we were falling behind. I said this to Layelah, but she only remarked that it was fatigued with its long journey. To this I objected that the others had made as long a journey, and insisted that she should draw nearer. This she at first refused to do; but at length, as I grew persistent, she complied, or pretended to do so. In spite of this, however, we again fell behind, and I noticed that this always
happened when the reins were drawn tight. On making this discovery I suddenly seized both reins and let them trail loose, whereupon the athaleb at once showed a perceptible increase of speed, which proved that there was no fatigue in him whatever. This I said to Layelah.

She acquiesced with a sweet smile, and taking the reins again, she sat around so as to face me, and said:

"You are very quick. It is no use to try to deceive you, Atam-or: I wish to fall behind."

"Why?"

"To save you."

"To save me?"

"Yes. I can take you to the land of the Orin. Now is the time to escape from death. If you go back you must surely die; but now, if you will be guided by me, I can take you to the land of the Orin. There they all hate death, they love life, they live in the light. There you will find those who are like yourself; there you can love and be happy."

"But what of Almah?" I asked.

Layelah made a pretty gesture of despair.

"You are always talking of Almah," said she. "What is Almah to you? She is cold, dull, sad! She never will speak. Let her go."

"Never!" said I. "Almah is worth more than all the world to me."

Layelah sighed.

"I can never, never, never," said she, "get from you the least little bit of a kind word--even after all that I have done for you, and when I know that you will lie down and let you trample me under your feet if it gave you any pleasure."

"Oh, that is not the question at all," said I. "You are asking me to leave Almah--to be false to her--and I cannot."

"Among the Kosekin," said Layelah, "it is the highest happiness for lovers to give one another up."
"I am not one of the Kosekin," said I. "I cannot let her go away--I cannot let her go back to the amir--to meet death alone. If she dies she shall see me by her side, ready to die with her."

At this Layelah laughed merrily.

"Is it possible," said she, "that you believe that? Do you not know that if Almah goes back alone she will not die?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, she can only die when you are in her company. She has lived for years among us, and we have waited for someone to appear whom she might love, so that we might give them both the blessing of death. If that one should leave her, Almah could not receive the blessing. She would be compelled to live longer, until some other lover should appear. Now, by going with me to the land of the Orin, you will save Almah's life--and as for Almah, why, she will be happy--and dear papa is quite willing to marry her. You must see, therefore, dear Atam-or, that my plan is the very best that can be thought of for all of us, and above all for Almah."

This, however, was intolerable; and I could not consent to desert Almah, even if by doing so I should save her life. My own nature revolted from it. Still it was not a thing which I could dismiss on the instant. The safety of Almah's life, indeed, required consideration; but then the thought came of her wonder at my desertion. Would she not think me false? Would not the thought of my falsity be worse than death?

"No," said I, "I will not leave her--not even to save her life. Even among us there are things worse than death. Almah would rather die by the sacrificial knife than linger on with a broken heart."

"Oh no," said Layelah, sweetly; "she will rejoice that you are safe. Do you not see that while you are together death is inevitable, but if you separate you may both live and be happy?"

"But she will think me dead," said I, as a new idea occurred. "She will think that some accident has befallen me."

"Oh no, she won't," said Layelah; "she will think that you have gone off with me."

"Then that will be worse, and I would rather die, and have her die with me, than live and have her think me false."

"You are very, very obstinate," said Layelah, sweetly.

I made no reply. During this conversation I had been too intent upon Layelah's words to notice the athalebs before me; but now as I looked up I saw that we had fallen far behind, and that Layelah had headed our athaleb in a new direction. Upon this I once more snatched the reins from her, and tried to return to our former course. This, however, I was utterly unable to do.

Layelah laughed.

"You will have to let me guide our course," said she. "You can do nothing. The athaleb will now go in a
straight line to the land of the Orin."
   Upon this I started up in wild excitement.  
   "Never, never, never!" I cried, in a fury. "I will not; I will destroy this athaleb and perish in the water!"
   As I said this I raised my rifle.
   "What are you going to do?" cried Layelah, in accents of fear.
   "Turn back," I cried, "or I will kill this athaleb!"
   Upon this Layelah dropped the reins, stood up, and looked at me with a smile.
   "Oh, Atam-or," said she, "what a thing to ask! How can I go back now, when we have started for the land of the Orin?"
   "We shall never reach the land of the Orin," I cried; "we shall perish in the sea!"
   "Oh no," said Layelah; "you cannot kill the athaleb. You are no more than an insect; your rod is a weak thing, and will break on his iron frame."
   It was evident that Layelah had not the slightest idea of the powers of my rifle. There was no hesitation on my part. I took aim with the rifle. At that moment I was desperate. I thought of nothing but the swift flight of the athaleb, which was bearing me away forever from Almah. I could not endure that thought, and still less could I endure the thought that she should believe me false. It was therefore in a wild passion of rage and despair that I levelled my rifle, taking aim as well as I could at what seemed a vital part under the wing. The motion of the wing rendered this difficult, however, and I hesitated a moment, so as to make sure. All this time Layelah stood looking at me with a smile on her rosy lips and a merry twinkle in her eyes--evidently regarding my words as empty threats and my act as a vain pretence, and utterly unprepared for what was to follow.
   Suddenly I fired both barrels in quick succession. The reports rang out in thunder over the sea. The athaleb gave a wild, appalling shriek, and fell straight down into the water, fluttering vainly with one wing, while the other hung down useless. A shriek of horror burst from Layelah. She started back, and fell from her standing-place into the waves beneath. The next instant we were all in the water together--the athaleb writhing and lashing the water into foam, while I involuntarily clung to his coarse mane, and expected death every moment.
   But death did not come; for the athaleb did not sink, but floated with his back out of the water, the right pinion being sunk underneath and useless, and the left struggling vainly with the sea. But after a time he folded up the left wing and drew it close in to his side, and propelled himself with his long hind-legs. His right wing was broken, but he did not seem to have suffered any other injury.
   Suddenly I heard a cry behind me:
   "Atam-or! oh, Atam-or!"
   I looked around and saw Layelah. She was swimming in the water, and seemed exhausted. In the agitation of the past few moments I had lost sight of her, and had thought that she was drowned; but now the sight of her roused me from my stupor and brought me back to myself. She was swimming, yet her strokes were weak and her face was full of despair. In an instant I had flung off my coat, rolled up the rifle and pistol in its folds, and sprung into the water. A few strokes brought me to Layelah. A moment more and I should have been too late. I held her head out of water, told her not to struggle, and then struck out to go back. It would have been impossible for me to do this, encumbered with such a load, had I not fortunately perceived the floating wing of the athaleb close beside me. This I seized, and by means of it drew myself with Layelah alongside; after which I succeeded in putting her on the back of the animal, and soon followed myself.
   The terror of the rifle had overwhelmed her, and the suddenness of the catastrophe had almost killed her. She had struggled in the water for a long time, and had called to me in vain. Now she was quite exhausted, and lay in my arms trembling and sobbing. I spoke to her encouragingly, and wrapped her in my coat, and rubbed her hands and feet, until at last she began to recover. Then she wept quietly for a long time; then the weeping fit passed away. She looked up with a smile, and in her face there was unutterable gratitude.
   "Atam-or," said she, "I never loved death like the rest of the Kosekin; but now--but now--I feel that death with you would be sweet."
   Then tears came to her eyes, and I found tears coming to my own, so that I had to stoop down and kiss away the tears of Layelah. As I did so she twined both her arms around my neck, held me close to her, and sighed.
   "Oh, Atam-or, death with you is sweet! And now you cannot reproach me-- You have done this yourself, with your terrible power; and you have saved my life to let me die with you. You do not hate me, then, Atam-or, do you? Just speak once to a poor little girl, and say that you do not hate her!"
   All this was very pitiable. What man that had a heart in his breast could listen unmoved to words like these, or look without emotion upon one so beautiful, so gentle, and so tender? It was no longer Layelah in triumph with whom I had to do, but Layelah in distress: the light banter, the teasing, mocking smile, the kindling eye, the ready laugh--all were gone. There was nothing now but mournful tenderness--the timid appeal of one who dreaded a
repulse, the glance of deep affection, the abandonment of love.

I held Layelah in my arms, and I thought of nothing now but words of consolation for her. Life seemed over; death seemed inevitable; and there, on the back of the athaleb, we floated on the waters and waited for our doom.

CHAPTER XXV
FALLING, LIKE ICARUS, INTO THE SEA

The aurora light, which had flamed brightly, was now extinct, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, where we floated on the back of the monster. He swam, forcing himself onward with his hind-legs, with one broad wing folded up close. Had both been folded up the athaleb could have swum rapidly; but the broken wing lay expanded over the water, tossing with the waves, so that our progress was but slight. Had it not been for this, the athaleb's own instinct might have served to guide him toward some shore which we might have hoped to reach before life was extinct; but as it was, all thought of reaching any shore was out of the question, and there arose before us only the prospect of death—a death, too, which must be lingering and painful and cruel. Thus amid the darkness we floated, and the waves dashed around us, and the athaleb never ceased to struggle in the water, trying to force his way onward. It seemed sweet at that moment to have Layelah with me, for what could have been more horrible than loneliness amid those black waters? and Layelah's mind was made up to meet death with joy, so that her mood conveyed itself to me. And I thought that since death was inevitable it were better to meet it thus, and in this way end my life—not amid the horrors of the sacrifice and the Mista Kosek, but in a way which seemed natural to a seafaring man like myself, and with which I had long familiarized my thoughts. For I had fallen upon a world and among people which were all alien and unintelligible to me; and to live on would only open the way to new and worse calamities. There was peace also in the thought that my death would snatch the prospect of death from Almah. She would now be safe. It was only when we were together as lovers that death threatened her; but now since I was removed she could resume her former life, and she might remember me only as an episode in that life. That she would remember me I felt sure, and that she would weep for me and mourn after me was undeniable; but time as it passed would surely alleviate that grief, and Almah would live and be happy. Perhaps she might yet regain her native land and rejoin her loved kindred, whom she would tell of the stranger from an unknown shore who had loved her, and through whose death she had gained her life. Such were the thoughts that filled my mind as I floated over the black water with darkness all around, as I held Layelah in my arms, with my coat wrapped around her, and murmured in her ear tender words of consolation and sympathy.

A long, long time had passed—how long I know not—when suddenly Layelah gave a cry, and started up on her knees, with her head bent forward listening intently. I too listened, and I could distinctly hear the sound of breakers.

It was evident that we were approaching some shore; and, from what I remembered of the shore of Magones, such a shore meant death, and death alone. We stood up and tried to peer through the gloom. At length we saw a whole line of breakers, and beyond all was black. We waited anxiously in that position, and drew steadily nearer. It was evident that the athaleb was desirous of reaching that shore, and we could do nothing but await the result.

But the athaleb had his wits about him, and swam along on a line with the breakers for some distance, until at length an opening appeared, into which he directed his course. Passing through this we reached still water, which seemed like a lagoon surrounded by a coral reef. The athaleb swam on farther, and at length we saw before us an island with a broad, sandy beach, beyond which was the shadowy outline of a forest. Here the monster landed, and dragged himself wearily upon the sand, where he spread his vast bulk out, and lay panting heavily. We dismounted—first, so as to assist Layelah; and then it seemed as if death were postponed for a time, since we had reached this place where the rich and rank vegetation spoke of nothing but vigorous life.

Fortune had indeed dealt strangely with me. I had fled with Almah, and with her had reached one desolate shore, and now I found myself with Layelah upon another shore, desolate also, but not a savage wilderness. This lonely island, ringed with the black ocean waters, was the abode of a life of its own, and there was nothing here to crush the soul into a horror of despair like that which was caused by the tremendous scenes on Magones.

In an instant Layelah revived from her gloom. She looked around, clapped her little hands, laughed aloud, and danced for joy.

"Oh, Atam-or," she cried, "see—see the trees, see the grass, the bushes! This is a land of wonder. As for food, you can call it down from the sky with your sepet-ram, or we can find it on the rocks. Oh, Atam-or! life is better than death, and we can live here, and we can be happy. This shall be better to us than the lands of the Orin, for we shall be alone, and we shall be all in all to one another."

I could not help laughing, and I said:

"Layelah, this is not the language of the Kosekin. You should at once go to the other side of this island, and sit down and wait for death."

"Never," said Layelah; "you are mine, Atam-or, and I never will leave you. If you wish me to die for you, I will
gladly lay down my life; but I will not leave you. I love you, Atam-or; and now, whether it be life or death, it is all
the same so long as I have you."

Our submersion in the sea and our long exposure afterward had chilled both of us, but Layelah felt it most. She
was shivering in her wet clothes in spite of my coat which I insisted on her wearing, and I determined, if possible, to
kindle a fire. Fortunately my powder was dry, for I had thrown off my flask with my coat before jumping into the
sea, and thus I had the means of creating fire. I rubbed wet powder over my handkerchief, and then gathered some
dried sticks and moss. After this I found some dead trees, the boughs of which were dry and brittle, and in the
exercise I soon grew warm, and had the satisfaction of seeing a great heap of fagots accumulating. I fired my pistol
into the handkerchief, which, being saturated with powder, caught the fire, and this I blew into a flame among the
dried moss. A bright fire now sprang up and blazed high in the air; while I, in order to have an ample supply of fuel,
continued to gather it for a long time. At length, as I came back, I saw Layelah lying on the sand in front of the fire,
sound asleep. I was glad of this, for she was weary, and had seemed so weak and tremulous that I had felt anxious;
so now I arranged my coat over her carefully, and then sat down for a time to think over this new turn which my
fortune had taken.

This island was certainly very unlike Magones, yet I had no surety but that it might be equally destitute of food.
This was the first question, and I could not think of sleep until I had found out more about the place. The aurora
light, which constantly brightens and lessens in this strange world, was now shining gloriously, and I set forth to
explore the island. The beach was of fine sand all the way. The water was smooth, and shut in on every side by an
outer reef against which the sea-waves broke incessantly. As I walked I soon perceived what the island was; for I
had often seen such places before in the South Pacific. It was, in fact, a coral islet, with a reef of rocks encircling it
on every side. The vegetation, however, was unlike anything in the world beyond; for it consisted of many varieties
of tree-ferns, that looked like palms, and giant grasses, and bamboo. The island was but small, and the entire circuit
was not over a mile. I saw nothing that looked like food, nor did it seem likely that in so small a place there could be
enough sustenance for us. Our only hope would be from the sea, yet even here I could see no signs of any sort of
shell-fish. On the whole the prospect was discouraging, and I returned to the starting-point with a feeling of
dejection; but this feeling did not trouble me much at that time: my chief thought was of rest, and I flung myself
down on the sand and fell asleep.

I was awakened by a cry from Layelah. Starting up, I saw her standing and looking into the sky. She was
intensely excited. As soon as she saw me she rushed toward me and burst into tears, while I, full of wonder, could
only stare upward.

"Oh!" cried Layelah, "they've turned back--they've found us! We shall have to leave our dear, lovely island.
Oh, Atam-or, I shall lose you now; for never, never, never again will you have one thought of love for your poor
Layelah!"

With these words she clung sobbing to me. For my part I do not remember what I said to soothe her, for the
sight above was so amazing that it took up all my attention. The aurora shone bright, and in the sky I saw two vast
objects wheeling and circling, as if about to descend. I recognized them at once as athalebs; but as their backs were
hid from view by their immense wings, I could not make out whether they were wanderers about to alight of their
own accord, or guided here by riders--perhaps by the Kosekin from whom we had been parted.

This much at least I remember. I said to Layelah that these athalebs were wild ones, which had come here
because they saw or scented our wounded one; but Layelah shook her head with mournful meaning.

"Oh no," said she; "Almah has come back for you. This fire-light has guided them. If you had not made the fire
they never, never, never could have found us; but now all is lost."

There was no time for conversation or discussion. The athalebs drew swiftly nearer and nearer, descending in
long circuits, until at length they touched the ground not far away on the wide sandy beach. Then we saw people on
their backs, and among them was Almah. We hurried toward them, and Almah rushed into my arms, to the great
disgust of Layelah, for she was close beside me and saw it all. She gave an exclamation of grief and despair, and
hurried away.

From Almah I learned that our disappearance had caused alarm; that two of the athalebs had come back in
search of us; that they had been to Magones, and had searched over the seas, and were just about giving us up as
lost, when the fire-light had attracted their attention and drawn them here.

I said nothing at that time about the cause of our disappearance, but merely remarked that the athaleb had fallen
into the sea and swam here. This was sufficient. They had to remain here for some time longer to rest their athalebs.
At length we prepared to depart. Our wounded athaleb was left behind to take care of himself. I was taken with
Almah, and Layelah went on the other. We were thus separated; and so we set forth upon our return, and at length
arrived at the amir.

CHAPTER XXVI
GRIMM'S LAW AGAIN

Dinner was now announced, and Oxenden laid the manuscript aside; whereupon they adjourned to the cabin, where they proceeded to discuss both the repast and the manuscript.

"Well," said Featherstone, "More's story seems to be approaching a crisis. What do you think of it now, Melick? Do you still think it a sensational novel?"

"Partly so," said Melick; "but it would be nearer the mark to call it a satirical romance."

"Why not a scientific romance?"

"Because there's precious little science in it, but a good deal of quiet satire."

"Satire on what?" asked Featherstone. "I'll be hanged if I can see it."

"Oh, well," said Melick, "on things in general. The satire is directed against the restlessness of humanity; its impulses, feelings, hopes, and fears—all that men do and feel and suffer. It mocks us by exhibiting a new race of men, animated by passions and impulses which are directly the opposite of ours, and yet no nearer happiness than we are. It shows us a world where our evil is made a good, and our good an evil; there all that we consider a blessing is had in abundance—prolonged and perpetual sunlight, riches, power, fame—and yet these things are despised, and the people, turning away from them, imagine that they can find happiness in poverty, darkness, death, and unrequited love. The writer thus mocks at all our dearest passions and strongest desires; and his general aim is to show that the mere search for happiness per se is a vulgar thing, and must always result in utter nothingness. The writer also teaches the great lesson that the happiness of man consists not in external surroundings, but in the internal feelings, and that heaven itself is not a place, but a state. It is the old lesson which Milton extorted from Satan:

"'What matter where, if I be still the same--'

"Or again:

"'The mind is its own place, and of itself Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven—'

"That's good too," cried Oxenden. "That reminds me of the German commentators who find in the Agamemnon of AESchylus or the OEdipus of Sophocles or the Hamlet of Shakespeare motives and purposes of which the authors could never have dreamed, and give us a metaphysical, beer-and-tobacco, High-Dutch Clytemnestra or Antigone or Lady Macbeth. No, my boy, More was a simple sailor, and had no idea of satirizing anything."

"How, then, do you account for the perpetual undercurrent of meaning and innuendo that may be found in every line?"

"I deny that there is anything of the sort," said Oxenden. "It is a plain narrative of facts; but the facts are themselves such that they give a new coloring to the facts of our own life. They are in such profound antithesis to European ways that we consider them as being written merely to indicate that difference. It is like the Germania of Tacitus, which many critics still hold to be a satire on Roman ways, while as a matter of fact it is simply a narrative of German manners and customs."

"I hope," cried Melick, "that you do not mean to compare this awful rot and rubbish to the Germania of Tacitus?"

"By no means," said Oxenden; "I merely asserted that in one respect they were analogous. You forced on the allusion to the Germania by calling this 'rot and rubbish' a satirical romance."

"Oh, well," said Melick, "I only referred to the intention of the writer. His plan is one thing and his execution quite another. His plan is not bad, but he fails utterly in his execution. The style is detestable. If he had written in the style of a plain seaman, and told a simple unvarnished tale, it would have been all right. In order to carry out properly such a plan as this the writer should take Defoe as his model, or, still better, Dean Swift. Gulliver's Travels and Robinson Crusoe show what can be done in this way, and form a standard by which all other attempts must be judged. But this writer is tawdry; he has the worst vices of the sensational school—he shows everywhere marks of haste, gross carelessness, and universal feebleness. When he gets hold of a good fancy, he lacks the patience that is necessary in order to work it up in an effective way. He is a gross plagiarist, and over and over again violates in the most glaring manner all the ordinary proprieties of style. What can be more absurd, for instance, than the language which he puts into the mouth of Layelah? Not content with making her talk like a sentimental boarding-school, bread-and-butter English miss, he actually forgets himself so far as to put in her mouth a threadbare joke, which everyone has heard since childhood."

"What is that?"

"Oh, that silly speech about the athaleb swallowing its victuals whole."

"What's the matter with that?" asked Oxenden. "It's merely a chance resemblance. In translating her words into English they fell by accident into that shape. No one but you would find fault with them. Would it have been better if he had translated her words into the scientific phraseology which the doctor made use of with regard to the ichthyosaurus? He might have made it this way: 'Does it bite?' 'No; it swallows its food without mastication.' Would
that have been better? Besides, it's all very well to talk of imitating Defoe and Swift; but suppose he couldn't do it?"

"Then he shouldn't have written the book."

"In that case how could his father have heard about his adventures?"

"His father!" exclaimed Melick. "Do you mean to say that you still accept all this as bona fide?"

"Do you mean to say," retorted Oxenden, "that you still have any doubt about the authenticity of this remarkable manuscript?"

At this each looked at the other; Melick elevated his eyebrows, and Oxenden shrugged his shoulders, but each seemed unable to find words to express his amazement at the other's stupidity, and so they took refuge in silence.

"What do you understand by this athaleb, doctor?" asked Featherstone.

"The athaleb?" said the doctor. "Why, it is clearly the pterodactyl.

"By-the-bye," interrupted Oxenden, "do please take notice of that name. It affords another exemplification of 'Grimm's Law.' The Hebrew word is 'ataleph,' and means bat. The Kosekin word is 'athaleb.' Here you see the thin letter of Hebrew represented by the aspirated letter of the Kosekin language, while the aspirated Hebrew is represented by the Kosekin medial."

"Too true," exclaimed Melick, in a tone of deep conviction; "and now, Oxenden, won't you sing us a song?"

"Nonsense," said Featherstone; "let the doctor tell us about the athaleb."

"Well," resumed the doctor, "as I was saying, it must be undoubtedly the pterodactyl. It is a most extraordinary animal, and is a species of flying lizard, although differing from the lizard in many respects. It has the head and neck of a bird, the trunk and tail of an ordinary mammal, the jaws and teeth of a reptile, and the wings of a bat. Owen describes one whose sweep of wings exceeded twenty feet, and many have been found of every gradation of size down to that of a bat. There is no reason why they should not be as large as More says; and I for my part do not suspect him of exaggeration. Some have supposed that a late, lingering individual may have suggested the idea of the fabulous dragon--an idea which seems to be in the minds of nearly all the human race, for in the early records of many nations we find the destruction of dragons assigned to their gods and heroes. The figure of the pterodactyl represents pretty closely that which is given to the dragons. It is not impossible that they may have existed into the period which we call prehistoric, and that monsters far larger than any which we have yet discovered may have lingered until the time when man began to increase upon the earth, to spread over its surface, and to carve upon wood and stone representations of the most striking objects around him. When the living pterodactyls had disappeared the memory of them was preserved; some new features were added, and the imagination went so far as to endow them with the power of belching forth smoke and flames. Thus the dragon idea pervaded the minds of men, and instead of a natural animal it became a fabulous one.

"The fingers of the forelegs were of the ordinary dimensions, and terminated with crooked nails, and these were probably used to suspend themselves from trees. When in repose it rested on its hind legs like a bird, and held its neck curving behind, so that its enormous head should not disturb its equilibrium. The size and form of the feet, of the leg, and of the thigh prove that they could hold themselves erect with firmness, their wings folded, and move about in this way like birds, just as More describes them as doing. Like birds they could also perch on trees, and could crawl like bats and lizards along the rocks and cliffs.

"Some think that they were covered with scales, but I am of the opinion that they had a horny hide, with a ridge of hair running down their backs--in which opinion I am sustained by More's account. The smaller kinds were undoubtedly insectivorous, but the larger ones must have been carnivorous, and probably fed largely on fish."

"Well, at any rate," said Melick, gravely, "this athaleb solves the difficult question as to how the Troglodytes emigrated to the South Pole."

"How?" asked the doctor.

"Why, they must have gone there on athalebs! Your friends the pterodactyls probably lingered longest among the Troglodytes, who, seeing that they were rapidly dying out, concluded to depart to another and a better world. One beauty of this theory is that it cannot possibly be disproved; another is that it satisfies all the requirements of the case; a third is that it accounts for the disappearance of the pterodactyls in our world, and their appearance at the South Pole; and there are forty or fifty other facts, all included in this theory, which I have not time just now to enumerate, but will try to do so after we have finished reading the manuscript. I will only add that the athaleb must be regarded as another link which binds the Kosekin to the Semitic race."

"Another link?" said Oxenden. "That I already have; and it is one that carries conviction with it."

"All your arguments invariably do, my dear fellow."

"What is it?" asked the doctor.

"The Kosekin alphabet," said Oxenden.

"I can't see how you can make anything out of that," said the doctor.

"Very well, I can easily explain," replied Oxenden. "In the first place we must take the old Hebrew alphabet. I
will write down the letters in their order first."

Saying this he hastily jotted down some letters on a piece of paper, and showed to the doctor the following:

Labials. Palatals. Linguals. A B C (or G) D E F Ch (or H) Dh (or Th) I Liquids, L M N O P K T

"That," said he, "is substantially the order of the old Hebrew alphabet."

"But," said the doctor, "the Kosekin alphabet differs in its order altogether from that."

"That very difference can be shown to be all the stronger proof of a connection between them," said Oxenden.

"I should like to know how."

"The fact is," said Oxenden, "these letters are represented differently in the two languages in exact accordance with Grimm's Law."

"By Jove!" cried Featherstone, "Grimm's Law again!"

"According to that law," continued Oxenden, "the letters of the alphabet ought to change their order. Now let us leave out the vowels and linguals, and deal only with the mutes. First, we have in the Hebrew alphabet the medials B, G, and D. Very well; in the Kosekin we have standing first the thin letters, or tenues, according to Grimm's Law, namely, P, K, T. Next we have in the Hebrew the aspirates F, Ch, Dh. In the Kosekin alphabet we have corresponding to them the medials B, G, D. Next we have in the Hebrew the tenues, or thin letters P, K, T. In the Kosekin we have the corresponding aspirates F, Ch, Th. The vowels, liquids, and sibilants need not be regarded just here, for the proof from the mutes is sufficient to satisfy any reasonable man."

"Well," said Melick, "I for one am thoroughly satisfied, and don't need another single word. The fact is, I never knew before the all-sufficient nature of Grimm's Law. Why, it can unlock any mystery! When I get home I must buy one—a tame one, if possible—and keep him with me always. It is more useful to a literary man than to any other. It is said that with a knowledge of Grimm's Law a man may wander through the world from Iceland to Ceylon, and converse pleasantly in all the Indo-European languages. More must have had Grimm's Law stowed away somewhere about him; and that's the reason why he escaped the icebergs, the volcanoes, the cannibals, the subterranean channel monster, and arrived at last safe and sound in the land of the Kosekin. What I want is Grimm's Law—a nice tidy one, well trained, in good working order, and kind in harness; and the moment I get one I intend to go to the land of the Kosekin myself."

CHAPTER XXVII

OXENDEN PREACHES A SERMON

"Magones," said the doctor, "is clearly a volcanic island, and, taken in connection with the other volcanoes around, shows how active must be the subterranean fires at the South Pole. It seems probable to me that the numerous caves of the Kosekin were originally fissures in the mountains, formed by convulsions of nature; and also that the places excavated by man must consist of soft volcanic rock, such as pumice-stone, or rather tufa, easily worked, and remaining permanently in any shape into which it may be fashioned. As to Magones, it seems another Iceland; for there are the same wild and hideous desolation, the same impassable wildernesses, and the same universal scenes of ruin, lighted up by the baleful and tremendous volcanic fires."

"But what of that little island on which they landed?" asked Featherstone. "That, surely, was not volcanic."

"No," said the doctor; "that must have been a coral island."

"By-the-bye, is it really true," asked Featherstone, "that these coral islands are the work of little insects?"

"Well, they may be called insects," replied the doctor; "they are living zoophytes of most minute dimensions, which, however, compensate for their smallness of size by their inconceivable numbers. Small as these are they have accomplished infinitely more than all that ever was done by the ichthyosaurus, the plesiosaurus, the pterodactyl, and the whole tribe of monsters that once filled the earth. Immense districts and whole mountains have been built up by these minute creatures. They have been at work for ages, and are still at work. It is principally in the South Seas that their labors are carried on. Near the Maldive Islands they have formed a mass whose volume is equal to the Alps. Around New Caledonia they have built a barrier of reefs four hundred miles in length, and another along the northeast coast of Australia a thousand miles in length. In the Pacific Ocean, islands, reefs, and islets innumerable have been constructed by them, which extend for an immense distance.

"The coral islands are called 'atolls.' They are nearly always circular, with a depression in the centre. They are originally made ring-shaped, but the action of the ocean serves to throw fragments of rock into the inner depression, which thus fills up; firm land appears; the rock crumbles into soil; the winds and birds and currents bring seeds here, and soon the new island is covered with verdure. These little creatures have played a part in the past quite as important as in the present. All Germany rests upon a bank of coral; and they seem to have been most active during the Oolitic Period."

"How do the creatures act?" asked Featherstone.

"Nobody knows," replied the doctor.

A silence now followed, which was at last broken by Oxenden.
"After all," said he, "these monsters and marvels of nature form the least interesting feature in the land of the Kosekin. To me the people themselves are the chief subject of interest. Where did they get that strange, all-pervading love of death, which is as strong in them as love of life is in us?"

"Why, they got it from the imagination of the writer of the manuscript," interrupted Melick.

"Yes, it's easy to answer it from your point of view; yet from my point of view it is more difficult. I sometimes think that it may be the strong spirituality of the Semitic race, carried out under exceptionally favorable circumstances to the ultimate results; for the Semitic race more than all others thought little of this life, and turned their affections to the life that lives beyond this. The Kosekin may thus have had a spiritual development of their own, which ended in this.

"Yet there may be another reason for it, and I sometimes think that the Kosekin may be nearer to the truth than we are. We have by nature a strong love of life--it is our dominant feeling--but yet there is in the minds of all men a deep underlying conviction of the vanity of life, and the worthlessness. In all ages and among all races the best, the purest, and the wisest have taught this truth--that human life is not a blessing; that the evil predominates over the good; and that our best hope is to gain a spirit of acquiescence with its inevitable ills. All philosophy and all religions teach us this one solemn truth, that in this life the evil surpasses the good. It has always been so. Suffering has been the lot of all living things, from the giant of the primeval swamps down to the smallest zoophyte. It is far more so with man. Some favored classes in every age may furnish forth a few individuals who may perhaps lead lives of self-indulgence and luxury; but to the mass of mankind life has ever been, and must ever be, a prolonged scene of labor intermingled with suffering. The great Indian religions, whether Brahmanic or Buddhistic, teach as their cardinal doctrine that life is an evil. Buddhism is more pronounced in this, for it teaches more emphatically than even the Kosekin that the chief end of man is to get rid of the curse of life and gain the bliss of Nirvana, or annihilation. True, it does not take so practical a form as among the Kosekin, yet it is believed by one-third of the human race as the foundation of the religion in which they live and die. We need not go to the Kosekin, however, for such maxims as these. The intelligent Hindoos, the Chinese, the Japanese, with many other nations, all cling firmly to this belief. Sakyamoum Gautama Buddha, the son and heir of a mighty monarch, penetrated with the conviction of the misery of life, left his throne, embraced a life of voluntary poverty, want, and misery, so that he might find his way to a better state--the end before him being this, that he might ultimately escape from the curse of existence. He lived till old age, gained innumerable followers, and left them as a solemn legacy the maxim that not to exist is better than to exist; that death is better than life. Since his day millions of his followers have upheld his principles and lived his life. Even among the joyous Greeks we find this feeling at times bursting forth it comes when we least expect it, and not even a Kosekin poet could express this view more forcibly than Sophocles in the OEdipus at Colonus:

"Not to be born surpasses every lot; And the next best lot by far, when one is born Is to go back whence he came as soon as possible; For while youth is present bringing vain follies, What woes does it not have, what ills does it not bear-- Murders, factions, strife, war, envy, But the extreme of misery is attained by loathsome old age-- Old age, strengthless, unsociable, friendless, Where all evils upon evils dwell together."

"I'll give you the words of a later poet," said Melick, "who takes a different view of the case. I think I'll sing them with your permission."

Melick swallowed a glass of wine and then sang the following:

"They may rail at this life: from the hour I began it I found it a life full of kindness and bliss, And until they can show me some happier planet, More social and bright, I'll content me with this. As long as the world has such lips and such eyes As before me this moment enraptured I see, They may say what they will of their orbs in the skies, But this earth is the planet for you, love, and me.'

"What a pity it is," continued Melick, "that the writer of this manuscript had not the philological, theological, sociological, geological, palaeological, ontological, ornithological, and all the other logical attainments of yourself and the doctor! He could then have given us a complete view of the nature of the Kosekin, morally and physically; he could have treated of the geology of the soil, the ethnology of the people, and could have unfolded before us a full and comprehensive view of their philosophy and religion, and could have crammed his manuscript with statistics. I wonder why he didn't do it even as it was. It must have been a strong temptation."

"More," said Oxenden, with deep impressiveness, "was a simple-minded though somewhat emotional sailor, and merely wrote in the hope that his story might one day meet the eyes of his father. I certainly should like to find some more accurate statements about the science, philosophy, and religion of the Kosekin; yet, after all, such things could not be expected."

"Why not?" said Melick; "it was easy enough for him."

"How?" asked Oxenden.

"Why, he had only to step into the British Museum, and in a couple of hours he could have crammed up on all
those points in science, philosophy, ethnology, and theology, about which you are so anxious to know.

"Well," said Featherstone, "suppose we continue our reading? I believe it is my turn now. I sha'n't be able to
hold out so long as you did, Oxenden, but I'll do what I can."

Saying this, Featherstone took the manuscript and went on to read.

CHAPTER XXVIII
IN PRISON

It was with hearts full of the gloomiest forebodings that we returned to the amir, and these we soon found to be
fully justified. The athalebs descended at that point from which they had risen--namely, on the terrace immediately
in front of the cavern where they had been confined. We then dismounted, and Layelah with the Kosekin guards
accompanied us to our former chambers. There she left us, saying that a communication would be sent to us.

We were now left to our own conjectures.

"I wonder what they will do to us?" said I.

"It is impossible to tell," said Almah.

"I suppose," said I, "they will punish us in some way; but then punishment among the Kosekin is what seems
honour and reward to me. Perhaps they will spare our lives, for that in their eyes ought to be the severest punishment
and the deepest disgrace imaginable."

Almah sighed.

"The Kosekin do not always act in this matter as one would suppose," said she. "It is quite likely that they may
dread our escaping, and may conclude to sacrifice us at once."

On the next jom I had a visit from the Kohen Gadol. He informed me that the paupers had held a Council of
State, in which they had made a special examination of our late flight. He and Layelah had both been examined, as
well as the Kosekin who had gone after us; but Layelah's testimony was by far the most important.

The Council of State gathered from Layelah's report that we had fled to Magones for the especial purpose of
gaining the most blessed of deaths; that she pursued us in the interest of the state; and that we on her arrival had
generously surrendered our own selfish desires, and had at once returned.

We learned that much gratification was felt by the council, and also expressed, at Layelah's account and at our
action.

First, at our eager love of death, which was so natural in their eyes; secondly, at the skill which we had shown
in selecting Magones; and finally, at our generosity in giving up so readily the blessed prospect of exile and want
and death, so as to come back to the amir. Had we been Kosekin our acts would have been natural enough; but,
being foreigners, it was considered more admirable in us, and it seemed to show that we were equal to the Kosekin
themselves. It was felt, however, that in our eager rush after death we had been somewhat selfish; but as this
probably arose from our ignorance of the law, it might be overlooked. On the whole it was decided that we ought to
be rewarded, and that, too, with the greatest benefits that the Kosekin could bestow. What these benefits were the
Kohen Gadol could not say; and thus we were left, as before, in the greatest possible anxiety. We still dreaded the
worst. The highest honors of these men might well awaken apprehension; for they thought that the chief blessings
were poverty and darkness and death.

Layelah next came to see me. She was as amiable as ever, and showed no resentment at all. She gave me an
account of what had happened at the Council of State, which was the same as what I had heard from the Kohen
Gadol.

I asked her why she had made such a report of us.

"To conciliate their good-will," said Layelah. "For if they thought that you had really fled from death from a
love of life, they would have felt such contempt for you that serious harm might have happened."

"Yes," said I; "but among the Kosekin what you call harm would probably have been just what I want. I should
like to be viewed with contempt, and considered unworthy of death and the Mista Kosek, and other such honors."

"Oh yes," said Layelah; "but that doesn't follow; for you see the paupers love death so intensely that they long
to bestow it on all; and if they knew that you were afraid of it, they would be tempted to bestow it upon you
immediately, just to show you how delightful a thing it is. And that was the very thing that I was trying to guard
against."

"Well," said I, "and what is the result? Do you know what their decision is?"

"Yes," said Layelah.

"What is it?" I asked, eagerly.

Layelah hesitated.

"What is it?" I cried again, full of impatience.

"I'm afraid it will not sound very pleasant to you," said Layelah, "but at any rate your life is spared for the
present. They have decided to give you what they call the greatest possible honors and distinctions."
Layelah paused, and looked at me earnestly. For my part these words sounded ominous, and were full of the darkest meaning.

"Tell me all," I said; "don't keep me in suspense."

"Well," said Layelah, "I'm afraid you will think it hard; but I must tell you. I will tell it, therefore, as briefly and formally as possible.

"First, then, they have decreed the blessing of separation. You and Almah must now be parted, since this is regarded as the highest bliss of lovers.

"Secondly, they have decreed the blessing of poverty. All these luxuries will be taken away, and you will be raised to an equality in this respect with the great paupers.

"Thirdly, you are to have the blessing of darkness. You are to be removed from this troublesome and vexatious light, which here is regarded as a curse, and henceforth live without it.

"Fourthly, the next decree is the high reward of imprisonment. You are to be delivered from the evils of liberty, and shut up in a dark cavern, from which it will be impossible to escape or to communicate with anyone outside.

"Fifthly, you are to associate with the greatest of the paupers, the class that is the most honored and influential. You will be present at all their highest councils, and will have the privilege of perpetual intercourse with those reverend men. They will tell you of the joys of poverty, the happiness of darkness, and the bliss of death."

Layelah paused, and looked at me earnestly.

"Is there anything more?" I gasped.

"No," said she. "Is not that enough? Some were in favor of bestowing immediate death, but they were outvoted by the others. You surely cannot regret that."

Layelah's words sounded like the words of a mocking demon. Yet she did not wish to distress me; she had merely stated my sentence in formal language, without any attempt to soften its tremendous import. As for me, I was overwhelmed with despair. There was but one thought in my mind--it was not of myself, but of Almah.

"And Almah?" I cried.

"Almah," said Layelah--"she will have the same; you are both included in the same sentence."

At this a groan burst from me. Horror overwhelmed me. I threw myself down upon the floor and covered my face with my hands. All was lost! Our fate--Almah's fate--was darkness, imprisonment, and death. Could anything be imagined that might mitigate such woes as these? Could anything be conceived of as more horrible? Yes; there remained something more, and this was announced by Layelah.

"Finally," said she, "it has been decreed that you shall not only have the blessing of death, but that you shall have the rare honor of belonging to the chosen few who are reserved for the Mista Kosek. Thus far this had not been granted. It was esteemed too high an honor for strangers; but now, by an exercise of unparalleled liberality, the Grand Council of Paupers have added this, as the last and best, to the high honors and rewards which they have decreed for you and Almah."

To this I had nothing to say; I was stupefied with horror. To such words what answer could be made? At that moment I could think of nothing but this tremendous sentence--this infliction of appalling woes under the miserable name of blessings! I could not think of Layelah; nor did I try to conjecture what her motives might be in thus coming to me as the messenger of evil. I could not find space amid my despair for speculations as to her own part in this, or stop to consider whether she was acting the part of a mere messenger, or was influenced by resentment or revenge. All this was far away from my thoughts; for all my mind was filled with the dread sentence of the Council of Paupers and the baleful prospect of the woes that awaited us.

On the next jom I saw Almah. She had already learned the awful tidings. She met me with a face of despair; for there was no longer any hope, and all that remained for us was a last farewell. After this we parted, and each of us was taken to our respective prison.

I was taken along dark passages until I came to a cavern with a low, dark portal. Upon entering I found the darkness deeper than usual, and there was only one solitary lamp, which diffused but a feeble ray through the gloom. The size of the place could not be made out. I saw here a group of human beings, and by the feeble ray of the lamp I perceived that they were wan and thin and emaciated, with scant clothing, all in rags, squalor, misery, and dirt; with coarse hair matted together, and long nails and shaggy beards. They reminded me in their personal appearance of the cannibals of the outer shore. These hideous beings all gathered around me, blinking at me with their bleary eyes and grinning with their abominable faces, and then each one embraced me. The filth, squalor, and unutterable foulness of these wretches all combined to fill my soul with loathing, and the inconceivable horror of that embrace wellnigh overwhelmed me. Yet, after all, it was surpassed by the horror of the thought that Almah might be at that very moment undergoing the same experience; and for her such a thing must be worse than for me.

I retreated as far as possible from them, deep into the thick darkness, and sat down. No convicted felon at the last hour of life, no prisoner in the dungeons of the Inquisition, ever could have suffered more mental agony than I
did at that moment. The blessings, the awful blessings of the Kosekin were descending upon my miserable head--
separation from Almah, squalor and dirt, imprisonment, the society of these filthy creatures, darkness, the shadow of
death, and beyond all the tremendous horrors of the Mista Kosek!

I do not know how the time passed, for at first I was almost stupefied with despair; nor could I ever grow
reconciled to the society of these wretches, scarce human, who were with me. Some food was offered me--filthy
stuff, which I refused. My refusal excited warm commendation; but I was warned against starving myself, as that
was against the law. In my despair I thought of my pistol and rifle, which I still kept with me--of using these against
my jailors, and bursting forth; but this wild impulse soon passed away, for its utter hopelessness was manifest. My
only hope, if hope it was, lay in waiting, and it was not impossible that I might see Almah again, if only once.

Joms passed away, I know not how. The Chief Pauper, who is the greatest man in the land of the Kosekin,
made several attempts to converse with me, and was evidently very condescending and magnanimous in his own
eyes; but I did not meet his advances graciously--he was too abhorrent. He was a hideous wretch, with eyes nearly
closed and bleary, thick, matted hair, and fiendish expression--in short, a devil incarnate in rags and squalor.

But as the joms passed I found it difficult to repel my associates. They were always inflicting their society upon
me, and thrusting on me nasty little acts of kindness. The Chief Pauper was more persistent than all, with his chatter
and his disgusting civilities. He was evidently glad to get hold of a fresh subject for his talkative genius; he was a
very garrulous cannibal, and perhaps my being a foreigner made me more interesting in his eyes.

The chief topic of his discourse was death. He hated life, loved death, longed for it in all its forms, whether
arising from disease or from violence. He was an amateur in corpses, and had a larger experience in dead bodies
than any other man in the nation.

I could not help asking him once why he did not kill himself, and be done with it.

"That," said he, "is not allowed. The temptation to kill one's self is one of the strongest that human nature can
experience, but it is one that we must struggle against, of course, for it is against all law. The greatest blessing must
not be seized. It must be given by nature or man. Those who violate the blessed mystery of death are infamous."

He assured me that he had all his life cultivated the loftiest feelings of love to others. His greatest happiness
consisted in doing good to others, especially in killing them. The blessing of death, being the greatest of all
blessings, was the one which he loved best to bestow upon others; and the more he loved his fellow-creatures the
more he wished to give them this blessing. "You," said he, "are particularly dear to me, and I should rather give to
you the blessing of death than to any other human being. I love you, Atam-or, and I long to kill you at this moment."

"You had better not try it," said I, grimly.

He shook his head despondingly.

"Oh no," said he; "it is against the law. I must not do it till the time comes."

"Do you kill many?" I asked.

"It is my pleasing and glorious office," he replied, "to kill more than any other; for, you must know, I am the
Sar Tabakin" (chief of the executioners).

The Chief Pauper's love of death had grown to be an all-absorbing passion. He longed to give death to all. As
with us there are certain philanthropists who have a mania for doing good, so here the pauper class had a mania for
doing what they considered good in this way. The Chief Pauper was a sort of Kosekin Howard or Peabody, and was
regarded by all with boundless reverence. To me, however, he was an object of never-ending hate, abhorrence, and
loathing; and, added to this, was the thought that there might be here some equally hideous female--someone like the
nightmare hag of the outer sea--a torment and a horror to Almah.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CEREMONY OF SEPARATION

Separated from Almah, surrounded by foul fiends, in darkness and the shadow of death, with the baleful
prospect of the Mista Kosek, it was mine to endure the bitterest anguish and despair; and in me these feelings were
all the worse from the thought that Almah was in a similar state, and was enduring equal woes. All that I suffered in
my present condition she too was suffering--and from this there was no possibility of escape. Perhaps her
surroundings were even worse, and her sufferings keener; for who could tell what these people might inflict in their
strange and perverted impulses?

Many joms passed, and there was only one thing that sustained me--the hope of seeing Almah yet again, though
it were but for a moment. That hope, however, was but faint. There was no escape. The gate was barred without and
within. I was surrounded by miscreants, who formed the chief class in the state and the ruling order. The Chief
Pauper was the highest magistrate in the land, from whose opinion there was no appeal, and the other paupers here
formed the Kosekin senate. Here, in imprisonment and darkness, they formed a secret tribunal and controlled
everything. They were objects of envy to all. All looked forward to this position as the highest object of human
ambition, and the friends and relatives of those here rejoiced in their honor. Their powers were not executive, but
deliberative. To the Meleks and Athons was left the exercise of authority, but their acts were always in
subordination to the will of the paupers.

"I have everything that heart can wish," said the Chief Pauper to me once. "Look at me, Atam-or, and see me as
I stand here: I have poverty, squalor, cold, perpetual darkness, the privilege of killing others, the near prospect of
death, and the certainty of the Mista Kosek—all these I have, and yet, Atam-or, after all, I am not happy."

To this strange speech I had nothing to say.

"Yes," continued the Chief Pauper, in a pensive tone, "for twenty seasons I have reigned as chief of the
Kosekin in this place. My cavern is the coldest, squalidest, and darkest in the land. My raiment is the coarsest rags. I
have separated from all my friends. I have had much sickness. I have the closest captivity. Death, darkness, poverty,
want, all that men most live and long for, are mine to satiety; and yet, as I look back and count the joms of my life to
see in how many I have known happiness, I find that in all they amount to just seven! Oh, Atam-or, what a comment
is this on the vanity of human life!"

To this I had no answer ready; but by way of saying something, I offered to kill him on the spot.

"Nay, nay, Atam-or," said he, with a melancholy smile, "do not tempt me. Leave me to struggle with
temptations by myself, and do not seek to make me falter in my duty. Yes, Atam-or, you behold in me a melancholy
example of the folly of ambition; for I often think, as I look down from my lofty eminence, that after all it is as well
to remain content in the humble sphere in which we are placed at birth; for perhaps, if the truth were known, there is
quite as much real happiness among the rich and splendid—among the Athons and Meleks."

On this occasion I took advantage of the Chief Pauper's softer mood to pour forth an earnest entreaty for him to
save Almah's life, or at least to mitigate her miseries. Alas! he was inexorable. It was like an appeal of some mad
prisoner to some gentle-hearted governor in Christendom, entreating him to put some fellow-prisoner to death, or at
least to make his confinement more severe.

The Chief Pauper stared at me in horror.

"You are a strange being, Atam-or," said he, gently. "Sometimes I think you mad. I can only say that such a
request is horrible to me beyond all words. Such degradation and cruelty to the gentle and virtuous Almah is
outrageous and forever impossible; no, we will not deprive her of a single one of those blessings which she now
enjoys."

I turned away in despair.

At length one jom the Chief Pauper came to me with a smile and said,

"Atam-or, let me congratulate you on this joyous occasion."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You are to have your ceremony of separation."

"Separation!" I repeated.

"Yes," said he. "Almah has given notice to us. She has announced her intention of giving you up, and
separating from you. With us the woman always gives the announcement in such cases. We have fixed the ceremony
for the third jom from this, and I hope you will not think it too soon."

This strange intelligence moved me greatly. I did not like the idea of a ceremony of separation; but behind this
there rose the prospect of seeing Almah, and I felt convinced that she had devised this as a mode of holding
communication with me, or at least of seeing me again. The thought of Layelah was the only thing that interfered
with this belief, for it might be her doings after all; yet the fact remained that I was to see Almah, and in this I
rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

The appointed jom came. A procession was formed of the paupers. The chief did not go, as he never left the
cavern except on the great sacrifices and Mista Koseks. The door was opened, and I accompanied the procession. On
our way all was dark, and after traversing many passages we came at length to the door of a cavern as gloomy as the
one I had left. On entering this I found all dark and drear; and a little distance before me there was a light burning,
around which was gathered a group of hags hideous beyond all expression. But these I scarcely noticed; for there
amid them, all pale and wan, with her face now lighted up with joyous and eager expectation, I saw my darling—my
Almah! I caught her in my arms, and for a few moments neither of us spoke a word. She sobbed upon my breast, but
I knew that the tears which she shed were tears of joy. Nor was our joy checked by the thought that it was to be so
short-lived. It was enough at that moment that we saw one another—enough that we were in one another's arms; and
so we mingled our tears, and shared one common rapture. And sweet it was—sweet beyond all expression—the
sweetest moment in all my life; for it had come in the midst of the drear desolation of my heart and the black
despair. It was like a flash of lightning in the intense darkness, short and sudden indeed, yet still intense while it
lasted, and in an instant filling all with its glow.

"I did this," murmured Almah, "to see you and to save you."

"Save me!" I repeated.
"Yes," said she. "I have seen Layelah. She told me that there is this chance and this one only to save you. I determined to try it. I cannot bear to think of you at the sacrifice--and for love of me meeting your death--for I would die to save you, Atam-or."

I pressed her closer in my arms.

"Oh, Almah," said I, "I would die to save you! and if this ceremony will save you I will go through with it, and accept my fate whatever it may be."

We were now interrupted.

The women--the hags of horror--the shriek-like ones, as I may call them, or the fiend-like, the female fiends, the foul ones--they were all around us; and one there was who looked so exactly like the nightmare hag of the outer sea that I felt sure she must be the same, who by some strange chance had come here. Such, indeed, is quite likely, for there may have been a pass over the mountains to the land of the Kosekin; and those savage cannibals may all have been honored Kosekin exiles, dwelling in poverty, want, woe, and darkness, all of which may have been allotted to them as a reward for eminent virtues. And so here she was, the nightmare hag, and I saw that she recognized me.

A circle was now formed around us, and the light stood in the middle. The nightmare hag also stood within the circle on the other side of the light opposite us. The beams of the lamp flickered through the darkness, faintly illuminating the faces of the horrible creatures around, who, foul and repulsive as harpies, seemed like unclean beasts, ready to make us their prey. Their glances seemed to menace death; their blear eyes rested upon us with a horrid eager hunger. My worst fears at that moment seemed realized; for I saw that Almah's associates were worse than mine, and her fate had been more bitter. And I wondered how it had been possible for her to live among such associates; or, even though she had lived thus far, whether it would be possible for her to endure it longer.

And now there arose a melancholy chant from the old hags around--a dreadful strain, that sounded like a funeral dirge, sung in shrill, discordant voices, led by the nightmare hag, who as she sang waved in her hand a kind of club. All the time I held Almah in my arms, regardless of those around us, thinking only of her from whom I must soon again be separated, and whom I must leave in this drear abode to meet her fearful fate alone. The chant continued for some time, and as long as it continued it was sweet to me; for it prolonged the meeting with Almah, and postponed by so much our separation.

At length the chant ceased. The nightmare hag looked fixedly at us, and spoke these words:

"You have embraced for the last time. Henceforth there is no more sorrow in your love. You may be happy now in being forever disunited, and in knowing the bliss of eternal separation. As darkness is better than light, as death is better than life, so may you find separation better than union."

She now gave a blow with her club at the lamp, which broke it to atoms and extinguished the flame. She continued:

"As the baleful light is succeeded by the blessed darkness, so may you find the light of union followed by the blessed darkness of separation."

And now in the deep darkness we stood clasped in one another's arms; while around us, from the horrible circle of hags, there arose another chant as harsh and discordant as the previous one, but which, nevertheless, like that, served at least to keep us together a little longer. For this reason it sounded sweeter than the sweetest music; and therefore, when at last the hideous noise ended, I felt a pang of grief, for I knew that I must now give up Almah forever.

I was right. The ceremony was over. We had to part, and we parted with tears of despair. I was led away, and as I went I heard Almah's sobs. I broke away, and tried to return for one more embrace; but in the darkness I could not find her, and could only hear her sobs at a greater distance, which showed that she too was being led away. I called after her,

"Farewell, Almah!"

Her reply came back broken with sobs.

"Farewell forever, Atam-or!"

I was once more led away, and again traversed the dark passages, and again came back to my den, which now seemed dark with the blackness of despair.

On my return I was formally and solemnly congratulated by all the paupers. I should not have received their congratulations had I not expected that there would be something more. I expected that something would be said about the result of this act of separation; for Almah had believed that it would be the means of saving my life, and I believed that it would be the means of saving her life, and for this reason each of us had performed our part; although, of course, the joy of meeting with one another would of itself have been sufficient, and more than sufficient, to make that ceremony an object of desire. I thought, therefore, that some statement might now be made to the effect that by means of this ceremony my status among the Kosekin would be changed, and that both I and
Almah, being no longer lovers, would be no longer fit for the sacrifice. To my intense disappointment, however, nothing whatever was said that had the remotest reference to this.

On the following jom I determined to ask the Chief Pauper himself directly; and accordingly, after a brief preamble, I put the question point-blank:

"Will our ceremony of separation make any difference as to our sacrifice?"

"What?" he asked, with a puzzled expression.

I repeated the question.

"I don't understand," said he, still looking puzzled.

Upon this I once more repeated it.

"How can that be?" said he at length; "how can the ceremony of separation have any effect upon your sacrifice? The ceremony of separation stands by itself as the sign and symbol of an additional blessing. This new happiness of separation is a great favor, and will make you the object of new envy and admiration; for few have been so fortunate as you in all the history of the Kosekin. But you are the favorite of the Kosekin now, and there is nothing that they will not do for you."

"But we were separate before," said I, indignantly.

"That is true," said he, "in point of fact; but this ceremony makes your separation a legal thing, and gives it the solemn sanction of law and of religion. Among the Kosekin one cannot be considered as a separate man until the ceremony of separation has been publicly performed."

"I understood," said I, "that we were chosen to suffer the sacrifice together because we were lovers, and now since you do not any longer regard us as lovers, why do you sacrifice us?"

At this question the Chief Pauper looked at me with one of those hungry glances of his, which showed how he thirsted for my blood, and he smiled the smile of an evil fiend.

"Why do we sacrifice you, Atam-or?" he replied. "Why, because we honor you both, and love you both so dearly that we are eager to give you the greatest of all blessings, and to deny you nothing that is in our power to bestow."

"Do you mean to sacrifice both of us?" I gasped.

"Of course."

"What! Almah too?"

"Certainly. Why should we be so cruel to the dear child as to deprive her of so great a boon?"

At this I groaned aloud and turned away in despair.

Many joms now passed away. I grew more and more melancholy and desperate. I thought sometimes of fighting my way out. My fire-arms were now my chief consolation; for I had fully made up my mind not to die quietly like a slaughtered calf, but to strike a blow for life, and meet my death amid slain enemies. In this prospect I found some satisfaction, and death was robbed of some of its terrors.

CHAPTER XXX
THE DAY OF SACRIFICE
At last the time came.

It was the end of the dark season. Then, as the sun rises for its permanent course around the heavens, when the long day of six months begins, all in the land of the Kosekin is sorrow, and the last of the loved darkness is mourned over amid the most solemn ceremonies, and celebrated with the most imposing sacrifices. Then the most honored in all the land are publicly presented with the blessing of death, and allowed to depart this hated life, and go to the realms of that eternal darkness which they love so well. It is the greatest of sacrifices, and is followed by the greatest of feasts. Thus the busy season—the loved season of darkness—ends, and the long, hateful season of light begins, when the Kosekin lurk in caverns, and live in this way in the presence of what may be called artificial darkness.

It was for us—for me and for Almah—the day of doom. Since the ceremony of separation I had not seen her; but my heart had been always with her. I did not even know whether she was alive or not, but believed that she must be; for I thought that if she had died I should have heard of it, as the Kosekin would have rejoiced greatly over such an event. For every death is to them an occasion of joy, and the death of one so distinguished and so beloved as Almah would have given rise to nothing less than a national festival.

Of time I had but a poor reckoning; but, from the way in which the paupers kept account of their joms, I judged that about three months had elapsed since the ceremony of separation.

The paupers were now all joyous with a hideous joy. The Chief Pauper was more abhorrent than ever. He had the blood-thirst strong upon him. He was on that jom to perform his horrible office of Sar Tabakin, and as he accosted me he smiled the smile of a demon, and congratulated me on my coming escape from life. To this I had no word of answer to make; but my hands held my rifle and pistol, and these I clutched with a firmer grasp as my last hour approached.
The time of departure at length arrived. Soldiers of the Kosekin came, following the paupers, who went first, while the guards came after me. Thus we all emerged into the open air. There the broad terrace already mentioned spread out before my eyes, filled with thousands upon thousands of human beings. It seemed as though the entire population of the city was there, and so densely packed was this great crowd that it was only with great difficulty that a way was laid open for our passage.

Above was the sky, where the stars were twinkling faintly. There was no longer the light of the aurora australis; the constellations glimmered but dimly, the moon was shining with but a feeble ray; for there far away over the icy crests of the lofty mountains I saw a long line of splendid effulgence, all golden and red—the light of the new dawn—the dawn of that long day which was now approaching. The sight of that dawning light gave me new life. It was like a sight of home—the blessed dawn, the sunlight of a bright day, the glorious daybreak lost for so long a time, but now at last returning. I feasted my eyes on the spectacle, I burst into tears of joy, and I felt as though I could gaze at it forever. But the sun as it travelled was rapidly coming into view; soon the dazzling glory of its rim would appear above the mountain crest, and the season of darkness would end. There was no time to wait, and the guards hurried me on.

There in the midst of the square rose the pyramid. It was fully a hundred feet in height, with a broad flat top. At the base I saw a great crowd of paupers. Through these we passed, and as we did so a horrible death-chant arose. We now went up the steps and reached the top. It was about sixty feet square, and upon it there was a quadrangle of stones set about three feet apart, about sixty in number, while in the midst was a larger stone. All of these were evidently intended for sacrificial purposes.

Scarce had I reached the top when I saw a procession ascend from the other side. First came some paupers, then some hags, and then, followed by other hags, I saw Almah. I was transfixed at the sight. A thrill passed through every nerve, and a wild impulse came to me to burst through the crowd, join her, and battle with them all for her life. But the crowd was too dense. I could only stand and look at her, and mark the paleness of her face and her mute despair. She saw me, waved her hand sadly, and gave a mournful smile. There we stood separated by the crowd, with our eyes fastened on each other, and all our hearts filled with one deep, intense yearning to fly to one another's side.

And now there came up from below, louder and deeper, the awful death-chant. Time was pressing. The preparations were made. The Chief Pauper took his station by the central stone, and in his right hand he held a long, keen knife. Toward this stone I was led. The Chief Pauper then looked with his blear and blinking eyes to where the dawn was glowing over the mountain crest, and every moment increasing in brightness; and then, after a brief survey, he turned and whetted his knife on the sacrificial stone. After this he turned to me with his evil face, with the glare of a horrid death-hunger in his ravenous eyes, and pointed to the stone.

I stood without motion.

He repeated the gesture and said, "Lie down here."

"I will not," said I.

"But it is on this stone," said he, "that you are to get the blessing of death."

"I'll die first!" said I, fiercely, and I raised my rifle.

The Chief Pauper was puzzled at this. The others looked on quietly, thinking it probably a debate about some punctilio. Suddenly he seemed struck with an idea.

"Yes, yes," said he. "The woman first. It is better so."

Saying this he walked toward Almah, and said something to the hags.

At this the chief of them—namely, the nightmare hag—led Almah to the nearest stone, and motioned to her to lie down. Almah prepared to obey, but paused a moment to throw at me one last glance and wave her hand as a last farewell. Then without a word she laid herself down upon the stone. At this a thrill of fury rushed through all my being, rousing me from my stupor, impelling me to action, filling my brain with madness. The nightmare hag had already raised her long keen knife in the air. Another moment and the blow would have fallen. But my rifle was at my shoulder; my aim was deadly. The report rang out like thunder. A wild, piercing yell followed, and when the smoke cleared away the nightmare hag lay dead at the foot of the altar. I was already there, having burst through the astonished crowd, and Almah was in my arms; and holding her thus for a moment, I put myself in front of her and stood at bay, with my only thought that of defending her to the last and selling my life as dearly as possible.

The result was amazing.

After the report there was for some moments a deep silence, which was followed by a wild, abrupt outcry from half a million people—the roar of indistinguishable words bursting forth from the lips of all that throng, whose accumulated volume arose in one vast thunder-clap of sound, pealing forth, echoing along the terraced streets, and rolling on far away in endless reverberations. It was like the roar of mighty cataracts, like the sound of many waters; and at the voice of that vast multitude I shrank back for a moment. As I did so I looked down, and beheld a scene as
appalling as the sound that had overawed me. In all that countless throng of human beings there was not one who
was not in motion; and all were pressing forward toward the pyramid as to a common centre. On every side there
was a multitudinous sea of upturned faces, extending as far as the eye could reach. All were in violent agitation, as
though all were possessed by one common impulse which forced them toward me. At such a sight I thought of
nothing else than that I was the object of their wrath, and that they were all with one common fury rushing toward
me to wreak vengeance upon me and upon Almah for the slaughter of the nightmare hag.

All this was the work of but a few moments. And now as I stood there holding Almah--appalled, despairing, yet
resolute and calm--I became aware of a more imminent danger. On the top of the pyramid, at the report of the rifle,
all had fallen down flat on their faces, and it was over them that I had rushed to Almah's side. But these now began
to rise, and the hags took up the corpse of the dead, and the paupers swarmed around with cries of "Mut! mut!"
(dead! dead!) and exclamations of wonder. Then they all turned their foul and bleary eyes toward me, and stood as if
transfixed with astonishment. At length there burst forth from the crowd one who sought to get at me. It was the
Chief Pauper. He still held in his hand the long knife of sacrifice. He said not a word, but rushed straight at me, and
as he came I saw murder in his look. I did not wait for him, but raising my rifle, discharged the second barrel full in
his face. He fell down a shattered, blackened heap, dead.

As the second report thundered out it drowned all other sounds, and was again followed by an awful silence. I
looked around. Those on the pyramid--paupers and hags--had again flung themselves on their faces. On the square
below the whole multitude were on their knees, with their heads bowed down low. The silence was more oppressive
than before; it was appalling--it was tremendous! It seemed like the dread silence that precedes the more awful
outburst of the hurricane when the storm is gathering up all its strength to burst with accumulated fury upon its
doomed victim.

But there was no time to be lost in staring, and that interval was occupied by me in hastily reloading my rifle. It
was my last resource now; and if it availed not for defence it might at least serve to be used against ourselves. With
this thought I handed the pistol to Almah, and hurriedly whispered to her that if I were killed, she could use it
against herself. She took it in silence, but I read in her face her invincible resolve.

The storm at last burst. The immense multitude rose to their feet, and with one common impulse came pressing
on from every side toward the pyramid, apparently filled with the one universal desire of reaching me--a desire
which was now all the more intense and vehement from these interruptions which had taken place. Why they had
fallen on their knees, why the paupers on the pyramid were still prostrate, I could not tell; but I saw now the
swarming multitude, and I felt that they were rolling in on every side--merciless, blood-thirsty, implacable--to tear
me to pieces. Yet time passed and they did not reach me, for an obstacle was interposed. The pyramid had smooth
sides. The stairways that led up to the summit were narrow, and did not admit of more than two at a time; yet, had
the Kosekin been like other people, the summit of the pyramid would soon have been swarming with them; but as
they were Kosekin, none came up to the top; for at the base of the pyramid, at the bottom of the steps, I saw a
strange and incredible struggle. It was not, as with us, who should go up first, but who should go up last; each tried
to make his neighbor go before him. All were eager to go, but the Kosekin self-denial, self-sacrifice, and love for the
good of others made each one intensely desirous to make others go up. This resulted in a furious struggle, in which,
as fast as anyone would be pushed up the steps a little way, he would jump down again and turn his efforts toward
putting up others; and thus all the energies of the people were worn out in useless and unavailing efforts--in a
struggle to which, from the very nature of the case, there could be no end.

Now those on the pyramid began to rise, and soon all were on their feet. Cries burst forth from them. All were
looking at us, but with nothing like hostility; it was rather like reverence and adoration, and these feelings were
expressed unmistakably in their cries, among which I could plainly distinguish such words as these: "Ap Ram!"
"Mosel anan wacosek!" "Sopet Mut!" (The Father of Thunder! Ruler of Cloud and Darkness! Judge of Death!) These
cries passed to those below. The struggle ceased. All stood and joined in the cry, which was taken up by those
nearest, and soon passed among all those myriads, to be repeated with thunder echoes far and wide.

At this it suddenly became plain to me that the danger of death had passed away; that these people no longer
regarded me as a victim, but rather as some mighty being--some superior, perhaps supernatural power, who was to
be almost worshipped. Hence these prostrations, these words, these cries, these looks. All these told me that the
bitterness of death had passed away. At this discovery there was, for a moment, a feeling of aversion and horror
within me at filling such a position; that I, a weak mortal, should dare to receive adoration like this; and I recoiled at
the thought: yet this feeling soon passed; for life was at stake--not my own merely, but that of Almah; and I was
ready now to go through anything if only I might save her: so, instead of shrinking from this new part, I eagerly
seized upon it, and at once determined to take advantage of the popular superstition to the utmost.

Far away over the crests of the mountains I saw the golden edge of the sun's disc, and the light flowed
therefrom in broad effulgence, throwing out long rays of glory in a luminous flood over all the land. I pointed to the
glorious orb, and cried to the paupers, and to all who were nearest, in a loud voice:

"I am Atam-or, the Man of Light! I come from the land of light! I am the Father of Thunder, of Cloud and Darkness; the Judge of Death!"

At this the paupers all fell prostrate, and cried out to me to give them the blessing of death.

I made no answer, but leading Almah to the edge of the pyramid, told her to fire the pistol. A million eyes were fixed on us. She held up the pistol and fired. Immediately after, I fired both barrels of the rifle; and as the reports rang out and the smoke cleared away, I heard a mighty murmur, and once more beheld all prostrate. Upon this I hurriedly loaded again, and waited for further revelations. All the time I could not help wondering at the effect produced by the rifle now, in comparison with the indifference with which it had been regarded at my first arrival in the country. I could not account for it, but supposed that the excitement of a great religious festival and the sudden death of the Chief Pauper and the Chief Hag had probably deeply impressed them. In the midst of these thoughts the whole multitude arose; and once more there came to my ears the universal uproar of innumerable cries, in the midst of which I could hear the words, "Ap Ram!" "Mosel anan wacosek!" "Sopet Mut!"

CHAPTER XXXI
CONCLUSION

In the midst of this the paupers and the hags talked earnestly together. Some of those who had been nearest in rank to the late Chief Pauper and Chief Hag were conspicuous in the debate. All looked at me and at Almah, and pointed toward the sun, which was wheeling along behind the distant mountain crest, showing a golden disc. Then they pointed to the dead bodies; and the hags took the Chief Hag, and the paupers the Chief Pauper, and laid them side by side on the central altar. After this a hag and a pauper advanced toward us, each carrying the sacrificial knife which had belonged to the deceased.

The hag spoke first, addressing Almah, in accordance with the Kosekin custom, which requires women to take the precedence in many things.

"Take this," she said, "O Almah, consort of Atam-or, and Co-ruler of Clouds and Darkness. Henceforth you shall be Judge of Death to the women of the Kosekin."

She then handed Almah the sacrificial knife of the Chief Hag, which Almah took in silence.

Then the pauper presented me with the sacrificial knife of the Chief Pauper, with the following words:

"Take this, O Atam-or, Father of Thunder and Ruler of Clouds and Darkness. Henceforth you shall be Judge of Death to the men of the Kosekin, and Sar Tabakin over the whole nation."

I received the knife in silence, for I had nothing to say; but now Almah spoke, as was fitting for her to do, since with the Kosekin the women must take the precedence; and here it was expected that she should reply in behalf of both of us.

So Almah, holding the sacrificial knife, stood looking at them, full of dignity, and spoke as follows:

"We will take this, O Kosekin, and we will reward you all. We will begin our reign over the Kosekin with memorable acts of mercy. These two great victims shall be enough for the Mista Kosek of this season. The victims designed for this sacrifice shall have to deny themselves the blessing of death, yet they shall be rewarded in other ways; and all the land from the highest to the lowest shall have reason to rejoice in our rule."

"To all you hags and paupers we grant the splendid and unparalleled boon of exile to Magones. There you can have all the suffering which heart can wish, and inevitable death. To all classes and ranks in the whole nation we promise to grant a diminution in their wealth by one-quarter. In the abundance of our mercy we are willing ourselves to bear the burden of all the offerings that may be necessary in order to accomplish this. All in the land may at once give up one-quarter of their whole wealth to us."

At this the hags and paupers gave a horrible yell of applause.

"As rulers of Light and Darkness, we will henceforth govern the nation in the light as well as in the dark. We will sacrifice ourselves so far to the public good as to live in the light, and in open palaces. We will consent to undergo the pains of light and splendor, to endure all the evils of luxury, magnificence, and boundless wealth, for the good of the Kosekin nation. We will consent to forego the right of separation, and agree to live together, even though we love one another. Above all, we will refuse death and consent to live. Can any rulers do more than this for the good of their people?"

Another outburst of applause followed.

"In three joms," continued Almah, "all you hags and paupers shall be sent to exile and death on Magones. As for the rest of the Kosekin, hear our words. Tell them from us that the laborers shall all be elevated to the rank of paupers, the artisans shall be made laborers, the tradesmen artisans, the soldiers tradesmen, the Athons soldiers, the Kohens Athons, and the Meleks Kohens. There shall be no Meleks in all the land. We, in our love for the Kosekin, will henceforth be the only Meleks. Then all the misery of that low station will rest on us; and in our low estate as Meleks we shall govern this nation in love and self-denial. Tell them that we will forego the sacrifice and consent to
live; that we will give up darkness and cavern gloom and live in light. Tell them to prepare for us the splendid palaces of the Meleks, for we will take the most sumptuous and magnificent of them all. Tell all the people to present their offerings. Tell them that we consent to have endless retinues of servants, soldiers, followers, and attendants. Tell them that with the advent of Almah and Atam--or a new era begins for the Kosekin, in which every man may be as poor as he likes, and riches shall be unknown in the land."

These extraordinary words seemed to fill the paupers with rapture. Exclamations of joy burst from them; they prostrated themselves in an irrepressible impulse of grateful admiration, as though such promises could only come from superior beings. Then most of them hurried down to communicate to the people below the glorious intelligence. Soon it spread from mouth to mouth, and all the people were filled with the wildest excitement.

For never before had such a thing been known, and never had such self-sacrifice been imagined or thought possible, as that the rulers of the Kosekin could consent to be rich when they might be paupers; to live together when they might be separate; to dwell in the light when they might lurk in the deepest cavern gloom; to remain in life when they might have the blessing of death. Selfishness, fear of death, love of riches, and love of luxury, these were all unintelligible to the Kosekin, as much as to us would be self-abnegation, contempt of death, voluntary poverty, and asceticism. But as with us self-denying rulers may make others rich and be popular for this, so here among the Kosekin a selfish ruler might be popular by making others poor. Hence the words of Almah, as they were made known, gave rise to the wildest excitement and enthusiasm, and the vast multitude poured forth their feelings in long shouts of rapturous applause.

Amid this the bodies of the dead were carried down from the pyramid, and were taken to the Mista Kosek in a long and solemn procession, accompanied by the singing of wild and dismal chants.

And now the sun, rolling along behind the icy mountain crest, rose higher and higher every moment, and the bright light of a long day began to illumine the world. There sparkled the sea, rising far away like a watery wall, with the horizon high up in the sky; there rose the circle of giant mountains, sweeping away till they were blended with the horizon; there rose the terraces of the amir, all glowing in the sunlight, with all its countless houses and cavern-openings and arching trees and pointing pyramids. Above was the canopy of heaven, no longer black, no longer studded with stars or glistening with the fitful shimmer of the aurora, but all radiant with the glorious sunlight, and disclosing all the splendors of the infinite blue. At that sight a thrill of joy passed through me. The long, long night at last was over; the darkness had passed away like some hideous dream; the day was here--the long day that was to know no shadow and no decline--when all this world should be illuminated by the ever-circling sun--a sun that would never set until his long course of many months should be fully run. My heart swelled with rapture, my eyes filled with tears. "O Light!" I cried; "O gleaming, golden Sunlight! O Light of Heaven!--light that brings life and hope to man!" And I could have fallen on my knees and worshipped that rising sun.

But the light which was so glorious to us was painful and distressing to the Kosekin. On the top of the pyramid the paupers crouched, shading their eyes. The crowd below began to disperse in all directions, so as to betake themselves to their coverts and to the caverns, where they might live in the dark. Soon nearly all were gone except the paupers at the foot of the pyramid, who were awaiting our commands, and a crowd of Meleks and Athons at a distance. At a gesture from me the few paupers near us descended and joined those below.

Almah and I were alone on the top of the pyramid.

I caught her in my arms in a rapture of joy. This revulsion from the lowest despair--from darkness and from death back to hope and light and life--was almost too much to endure. We both wept, but our tears were those of happiness.

"You will be all my own now," said I, "and we can fly from this hateful land. We can be united--we can be married--here before we start--and you will not be cruel enough to refuse. You will consent, will you not, to be my wife before we fly from the Kosekin?"

At this Almah's face became suffused with smiles and blushes. Her arms were about me, and she did not draw away, but looked up in sweet confusion and said,

"Why, as to that--I--I cannot be more your--your wife than I am."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, in wonder. "My wife!"

Her eyes dropped again, and she whispered:

"The ceremony of separation is with the Kosekin the most sacred form of marriage. It is the religious form; the other is merely the civil form."

This was unintelligible, nor did I try to understand it. It was enough to hear this from her own sweet lips; but it was a strange feeling, and I think I am the only man since Adam that ever was married without knowing it.

"As to flight," continued Almah, who had quite adopted the Kosekin fashion, which makes women take the lead--"as to flight, we need not hurry. We are all-powerful now, and there is no more danger. We must wait until we send embassies to my people, and when they are ready to receive us, we will go. But now let us leave this, for our
servants are waiting for us, and the light is distressing to them. Let us go to the nearest of our palaces and obtain rest and food."

Here Featherstone stopped, yawned, and laid down the manuscript.
"That's enough for to-day," said he; "I'm tired, and can't read any more. It's time for supper."
Exactly three minutes after the Galactic left the New York apartment of Professor John Hamish McLeod, Ph.D., Sc.D., a squad of U.B.I. men pushed their way into it.

McLeod heard the door chime, opened the door, and had to back up as eight men crowded in. The one in the lead flashed a fancily engraved ID card and said: "Union Bureau of Investigation. You're Professor Mac-Lee-Odd." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," McLeod said flatly, "I am not. I never heard of such a name." He waited while the U.B.I. man blinked once, then added: "If you are looking for Professor MuhCloud, I'm he." It always irritated him when people mispronounced his name, and in this case there was no excuse for it.

"All right, Professor McLeod," said the U.B.I. agent, pronouncing it properly this time, "however you want it. Mind if we ask you a few questions?"

McLeod stared at him for half a second. Eight men, all of them under thirty-five, in top physical condition. He was fifteen years older than the oldest and had confined his exercise, in the words of Chauncey de Pew, to "acting as pallbearer for my friends who take exercise." Not that he was really in poor shape, but he certainly couldn't have argued with eight men like these.

"Come in," he said calmly, waving them into the apartment.

Six of them entered. The other two stayed outside in the hall.

Five of the six remained standing. The leader took the chair that McLeod offered him.

"What are your questions, Mr. Jackson?" McLeod asked.

Jackson looked very slightly surprised, as if he were not used to having people read the name on his card during the short time he allowed them to see it. The expression vanished almost instantaneously. "Professor," he said, "we'd like to know what subjects you discussed with the Galactic who just left."

McLeod allowed himself to relax back in his chair. "Let me ask you two questions, Mr. Jackson: One: What the hell business is it of yours? Two: Why do you ask me when you already know?"

Again there was only a flicker of expression over Jackson's face. "Professor McLeod, we are concerned about the welfare of the human race. Your ... uh ... co-operation is requested."

"You don't have to come barging in here with an armed squad just to ask my co-operation," McLeod said.

"What do you want to know?"

Jackson took a notebook out of his jacket pocket. "We'll just get a few facts straight first, professor," he said, leafing through the notebook. "You were first approached by a Galactic four years ago, on January 12, 1990. Is that right?"

McLeod, who had taken a cigarette from his pack and started to light it, stopped suddenly and looked at Jackson as though the U.B.I. man were a two-headed embryo. "Yes, Mr. Jackson, that is right," he said slowly, as though he were speaking to a low-grade moron. "And the capital of California is Sacramento. Are there any further matters of public knowledge you would like to ask me about? Would you like to know when the War of 1812 started or who is buried in Grant's Tomb?"

Jackson's jaw muscles tightened, then relaxed. "There's no need to get sarcastic, professor. Just answer the questions." He looked back at the notebook. "According to the record, you, as a zoologist, were asked to accompany a shipment of animals to a planet named ... uh ... Gelakin. You did so. You returned after eighteen months. Is that correct?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes," McLeod said with heavy, biting sarcasm. "And the date of the Norman Conquest was A.D. 1066."

Jackson balled his fists suddenly and closed his eyes. "Mac. Loud. Stop. It." He was obviously holding himself under rigorous restraint. He opened his eyes. "There are reasons for asking these questions, professor. Very good reasons. Will you let me finish?"

McLeod had finished lighting his cigarette. He snapped his lighter off and replaced it in his pocket. "Perhaps," he said mildly. "May I make a statement first?"

Jackson took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then exhaled slowly. "Go ahead.

* * * * *

"Thank you." There was no sarcasm in McLeod's voice now, only patience. "First--for the record--I'll say that I consider it impertinent of you to come in here demanding information without explanation. No, Jackson; don't say
anything. You said I could make a statement. Thank you. Second, I will state that I am perfectly aware of why the questions are being asked.

"No reaction, Mr. Jackson? You don't believe that? Very well. Let me continue.

"On January twelve, nineteen-ninety, I was offered a job by certain citizens of the Galactic Civilization. These citizens of the Galactic Civilization wanted to take a shipload of Terrestrial animals to their own planet, Gelakin. They knew almost nothing about the care and feeding of Terrestrial animals. They needed an expert. They should have taken a real expert--one of the men from the Bronx Zoo, for instance. They didn't; they requested a zoologist. Because the request was made here in America, I was the one who was picked. Any one of seven other men could have handled the job, but I was picked.

"So I went, thus becoming the first Earthman ever to leave the Solar System.

"I took care of the animals. I taught the Galactics who were with me to handle and feed them. I did what I was paid to do, and it was a hard job. None of them knew anything about the care and feeding of elephants, horses, giraffes, cats, dogs, eagles, or any one of the other hundreds of Terrestrial life forms that went aboard that ship.

"All of this was done with the express permission of the Terrestrial Union Government.

"I was returned to Earth on July seventeen, nineteen-ninety-one.

"I was immediately taken to U.B.I. headquarters and subjected to rigorous questioning. Then I was subjected to further questioning while connected to a polyelectroencephalograph. Then I was subjected to hearing the same questions over again while under the influence of various drugs--in sequence and in combination. The consensus at that time was that I was not lying nor had I been subjected to what is commonly known as 'brain washing'. My memories were accurate and complete.

"I did not know then, nor do I know now, the location of the planet Gelakin. This information was not denied me by the Galactics; I simply could not understand the terms they used. All I can say now--and all I could say then--is that Gelakin is some three point five kiloparsecs from Sol in the general direction of Saggitarius."

"You don't know any more about that now than you did then?" Jackson interrupted, suddenly and quickly.


"I was handsomely paid for my work in Galactic money. They use the English word 'credit', but I'm not sure the English word has exactly the same meaning as the Galactic term. At any rate, my wages, if such I may call them, were confiscated by the Earth Government; I was given the equivalent in American dollars--after the eighty per cent income tax had been deducted. I ended up with just about what I would have made if I had stayed home and drawn my salary from Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History.

"Please, Mr. Jackson. I only have a little more to say.

"I decided to write a book in order to make the trip pay off. 'Interstellar Ark' was a popularized account of the trip that made me quite a nice piece of change because every literate and half-literate person on Earth is curious about the Galactics. The book tells everything I know about the trip and the people. It is a matter of public record. Since that is so, I refused to answer a lot of darn-fool questions--by which I mean that I refuse to answer any more questions that you already know the answers to. I am not being stubborn; I am just sick and tired of the whole thing."

Actually, the notoriety that had resulted from the trip and the book had not pleased McLeod particularly. He had never had any strong desire for fame, but if it had come as a result of his work in zoology and the related sciences he would have accepted the burden. If his "The Ecology of the Martian Polar Regions" had attracted a hundredth of the publicity and sold a hundredth of the number of copies that "Interstellar Ark" had sold, he would have been gratified indeed. But the way things stood, he found the whole affair irksome.

Jackson looked at his notebook as if he expected to see answers written there instead of questions. Then he looked back up at McLeod. "All right then, professor, what about this afternoon's conference. That isn't a matter of public record."

"And technically it isn't any of your business, either," McLeod said tiredly. "But since you have the whole conversation down on tape, I don't see why you bother asking me. I'm well aware that you can pick up conversations in my apartment."

Jackson pursed his lips and glanced at another of the agents, who raised his eyebrows slightly.

McLeod got it in spite of the fact that they didn't intend him to. His place was bugged, all right, but somehow the Galactic had managed to nullify their instruments! No wonder they were in such a tizzy.

McLeod smiled, pleased with himself and with the world for the first time that afternoon. He decided, however, that he'd better volunteer the information before they threatened him with the Planetary Security Act. That threat would make him angry, he knew, and he might say something that would get him in real trouble.

It was all right to badger Jackson up to a certain point, but it would be foolish to go beyond that.

"However," he went on with hardly a break, "since, as you say, it is not a matter of public record, I'm perfectly
willing to answer any questions you care to ask."

"Just give us a general rundown of the conversation," Jackson said. "If I have any questions, I'll ... uh ... ask them at the proper time."

McLeod did the best he could to give a clear picture of what the Galactic had wanted. There was really very little to it. The Galactic was a member of a race that McLeod had never seen before: a humanoid with red skin--fire-engine, not Amerindian--and a rather pleasant-looking face, in contrast to the rather crocodilian features of the Galactic resident. He had introduced himself by an un-pronounceable name and then had explained that since the name meant "mild" or "merciful" in one of the ancient tongues of his planet, it would be perfectly all right if McLeod called him "Clement." Within minutes, it had been "Clem" and "Mac."

McLeod could see that Jackson didn't quite believe that. Galactics, of whatever race, were aloof, polite, reserved, and sometimes irritatingly patronizing--never buddy-buddy. McLeod couldn't help what Jackson might think; what was important was that it was true.

What Clem wanted was very simple. Clem was--after a manner of speaking--a literary agent. Apparently the Galactic system of book publishing didn't work quite the way the Terrestrial system did; Clem took his commission from the publisher instead of the author, but was considered a representative of the author, not the publisher. McLeod hadn't quite understood how that sort of thing would work out, but he let it pass. There were a lot of things he didn't understand about Galactics.

All Clem wanted was to act as McLeod's agent for the publication of "Interstellar Ark."

"And what did you tell him?" Jackson asked.

"I told him I'd think it over."

Jackson leaned forward. "How much money did he offer?" he asked eagerly.

"Not much," McLeod said. "That's why I told him I'd think it over. He said that, considering the high cost of transportation, relaying, translation, and so on, he couldn't offer me more than one thousandth of one per cent royalties."

Jackson blinked. "One what?"

"One thousandth of one per cent. If the book sells a hundred thousand copies at a credit a copy, they will send me a nice, juicy check for one lousy credit."

Jackson scowled. "They're cheating you."

"Clem said it was the standard rate for a first book."

Jackson shook his head. "Just because we don't have interstellar ships and are confined to our own solar system, they treat us as though we were ignorant savages. They're cheating you high, wide, and handsome."

"Maybe," said McLeod. "But if they really wanted to cheat me, they could just pirate the book. There wouldn't be a thing I could do about it."

"Yeah. But to keep up their facade of high ethics, they toss us a sop. And we have to take whatever they hand out. You will take it, of course." It was more of an order than a question.

"I told him I'd think it over," McLeod said.

Jackson stood up. "Professor McLeod, the human race needs every Galactic credit it can lay its hands on. It's your duty to accept the offer, no matter how lousy it is. We have no choice in the matter. And a Galactic credit is worth ten dollars American, four pounds U.K., or forty rubles Soviet. If you sell a hundred thousand copies of your book, you can get yourself a meal in a fairly good restaurant and Earth will have one more Galactic credit stashed away. If you don't sell that many, you aren't out anything."

"I suppose not," McLeod said slowly. He knew that the Government could force him to take the offer. Under the Planetary Security Act, the Government had broad powers--very broad.

"Well, that isn't my business right now," Jackson said. "I just wanted to find out what this was all about. You'll hear from us, Professor McLeod."

"I don't doubt it," said McLeod.

The six men filed out the door.

Alone, McLeod stared at the wall and thought.

Earth needed every Galactic credit it could get; that was certain. The trouble came in getting them.

Earth had absolutely nothing that the Galactics wanted. Well, not absolutely, maybe, but so near as made no difference. Certainly there was no basis for trade. As far as the Galactics were concerned, Earth was a little backwater planet that was of no importance. Nothing manufactured on the planet was of any use to Galactics. Nothing grown on Earth was of any commercial importance. They had sampled the animals and plants for scientific purposes, but there was no real commercial value in them. The Government had added a few credits to its meager
McLeod thought about the natives of New Guinea and decided that on the Galactic scale Earth was about in the same position. Except that there had at least been gold in New Guinea. The Galactics didn't have any interest in Earth's minerals; the elements were much more easily available in the asteroid belts that nearly every planetary system seemed to have.

The Galactics were by no means interested in bringing civilization to the barbarians of Earth, either. They had no missionaries to bring new religion, no do-gooders to "elevate the cultural level of the natives." They had no free handouts for anyone. If Earthmen wanted anything from them, the terms were cash on the barrelhead. Earth's credit rating in the Galactic equivalent of Dun & Bradstreet was triple-Z-zero.

A Galactic ship had, so to speak, stumbled over Earth fifteen years before. Like the English explorers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the Galactics seemed to feel that it was necessary to install one of their own people on a new-found planet, but they were not in the least interested in colonization nor in taking over Earth's government. The Galactic Resident was not in any sense a Royal Governor, and could hardly even be called an ambassador. He and his staff--a small one, kept more for company than for any necessary work--lived quietly by themselves in a house they'd built in Hawaii. Nobody knew what they did, and it didn't seem wise to ask.

The first Galactic Resident had been shot and killed by some religious nut. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Galactic Space Navy--if that was the proper term--had come to claim the body. There were no recriminations, no reprisals. They came, "more in sorrow than in anger," to get the body. They came in a spaceship that was easily visible to the naked eye long before it hit the atmosphere--a sphere three kilometers in diameter. The missiles with thermonuclear warheads that were sent up to intercept the ship were detonated long before they touched the ship, and neither Galactics nor Earthmen ever mentioned them again. It had been the most frightening display of power ever seen on Earth, and the Galactics hadn't even threatened anyone. They just came to get a body.

Needless to say, there was little danger that they would ever have to repeat the performance.

The national governments of Earth had organized themselves hurriedly into the Terrestrial Union. Shaky at first, it had gained stability and power with the years. The first thing the Union Government had wanted to do was send an ambassador to the Galactic Government. The Galactic Resident had politely explained that their concept of government was different from ours, that ambassadors had no place in that concept, and, anyway, there was no capital to send one to. However, if Earth wanted to send an observer of some kind....

Earth did.

Fine. A statement of passenger fares was forthcoming; naturally, there were no regular passenger ships stopping at Earth and there would not be in the foreseeable future, but doubtless arrangements could be made to charter a vessel. It would be expensive, but....

If a New Guinea savage wants to take passage aboard a Qantas airliner, what is the fare in cowrie shells?

As far as McLeod knew, his book was the first thing ever produced on Earth that the Galactics were even remotely interested in. He had a higher opinion of the ethics of the Galactics than Jackson did, but a thousandth of a per cent seemed like pretty small royalties. And he couldn't for the life of him see why his book would interest a Galactic. Clem had explained that it gave Galactics a chance to see what they looked like through the eyes of an Earthman, but that seemed rather weak to McLeod.

Nevertheless, he knew he would take Clem's offer.

* * * * *

Eight months later, a shipload of Galactic tourists arrived. For a while, it looked as though Earth's credit problem might be solved. Tourism has always been a fine method for getting money from other countries--especially if one's own country is properly picturesque. Tourists always had money, didn't they? And they spend it freely, didn't they?

No.

Not in this case.

Earth had nothing to sell to the tourists.

Ever hear of baluts? The Melanesians of the South Pacific consider it a very fine delicacy. You take a fertilized duck egg and you bury it in the warm earth. Six months later, when it is nice and overripe, you dig it up again, knock the top off the shell the way you would a soft-boiled egg, and eat it. Then you pick the pinfeathers out of your teeth. Baluts.

Now you know how the greatest delicacies of Earth's restaurants affected the Galactics.

Earth was just a little too picturesque. The tourists enjoyed the sights, but they ate aboard their ship, which was evidently somewhat like a Caribbean cruise ship. And they bought nothing. They just looked.

And laughed.

And of course they all wanted to meet Professor John Hamish McLeod.
When the news leaked out and was thoroughly understood by Earth's population, there was an immediate reaction.

Editorial in Pravda:
The stupid book written by the American J. H. McLeod has made Earth a laughingstock throughout the galaxy. His inability to comprehend the finer nuances of Galactic Socialism has made all Earthmen look foolish. It is too bad that a competent Russian zoologist was not chosen for the trip that McLeod made; a man properly trained in the understanding of the historical forces of dialectic materialism would have realized that any Galactic society must of necessity be a Communist State, and would have interpreted it as such. The petty bourgeois mind of McLeod has made it impossible for any Earthman to hold up his head in the free Socialist society of the galaxy. Until this matter is corrected....

News item Manchester Guardian:
Professor James H. McLeod, the American zoologist whose book has apparently aroused a great deal of hilarity in Galactic circles, admitted today that both Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History have accepted his resignation. The recent statement by a University spokesman that Professor McLeod had "besmirched the honor of Earthmen everywhere" was considered at least partially responsible for the resignations. (See editorial.)

Editorial, Manchester Guardian:
... It is a truism that an accepted wit has only to say, 'Pass the butter,' and everyone will laugh. Professor McLeod, however, far from being an accepted wit, seems rather to be in the position of a medieval Court Fool, who was laughed at rather than with. As a consequence, all Earthmen have been branded as Fools....

Statement made by the American Senator from Alabama:
"He has made us all look like jackasses in the eyes of the Galactics, and at this precarious time in human history it is my considered opinion that such actions are treasonous to the human race and to Earth and should be treated and considered as such!"

Book review, Literary Checklist, Helvar III, Bornis Cluster:
"Interstellar Ark, an Earthman's View of the Galaxy," translated from the original tongue by Vonis Delf, Cr. 5.00. This inexpensive little book is one of the most entertainingly funny publications in current print. The author, one John McLeod, is a member of a type 3-7B race inhabiting a planet in the Outer Fringes.... As an example of the unwitting humor of the book, we have only to quote the following:
"I was shown to my quarters shortly before takeoff. Captain Benarly had assigned me a spacious cabin which was almost luxurious in its furnishings. The bed was one of the most comfortable I have ever slept in."

Or the following:
"I found the members of the crew to be friendly and co-operative, especially Nern Cronzel, the ship's physician."

It is our prediction that this little gem will be enjoyed for a long time to come and will be a real money-maker for its publishers.

* * * * *

They haven't hanged me yet, McLeod thought. He sat in his apartment alone and realized that it would take very little to get him hanged.

How could one book have aroused such wrath? Even as he thought it, McLeod knew the answer to that question. It wasn't the book. No one who had read it two and a half years before had said anything against it.

No, it wasn't the book. It was the Galactic reaction to the book. Already feeling inferior because of the standoffish attitude of the beings from the stars, the Homeric laughter of those same beings had been too much. It would have been bad enough if that laughter had been generated by one of the Galactics. To have had it generated by an Earthman made it that much worse. Against an Earthman, their rage was far from impotent.

Nobody understood why the book was funny, of course. The joke was over their heads, and that made human beings even angrier.

He remembered a quotation from a book he had read once. A member of some tribal-taboo culture--African or South Pacific, he forgot which--had been treated at a missionary hospital for something or other and had described his experience.
"The white witch doctor protects himself by wearing a little round mirror on his head which reflects back the evil spirits."

Could that savage have possibly understood what was humorous about that remark? No. Not even if you explained to him why the doctor used the mirror that way.

Now what? McLeod thought. He was out of a job and his bank account was running low. His credit rating had dropped to zero.
McLeod heard a key turn in the lock. The door swung open and Jackson entered with his squad of U.B.I. men. "Hey!" said McLeod, jumping to his feet. "What do you think this is?"
"Shut up, McLeod," Jackson growled. "Get your coat. You're wanted at headquarters."
McLeod started to say something, then thought better of it. There was nothing he could say. Nobody would care if the U.B.I. manhandled him. Nobody would protest that his rights were being ignored. If McLeod got his teeth knocked in, Jackson would probably be voted a medal.
McLeod didn't say another word. He followed orders. He got his coat and was taken down to the big building on the East River which had begun its career as the United Nations Building.
He was bundled up to an office and shoved into a chair.
Somebody shoved a paper at him. "Sign this!"
"What is it?" McLeod asked, finding his voice.
"A receipt. For two thousand dollars. Sign it."
McLeod looked the paper over, then looked up at the burly man who had shoved it at him. "Fifty thousand Galactic credits! What is this for?"
"The royalty check for your unprintably qualified book has come in, Funny Man. The Government is taking ninety-eight per cent for income taxes. Sign!"
McLeod pushed the paper back across the desk. "No. I won't. You can confiscate my money. I can't stop that, I guess. But I won't give it legal sanction by signing anything. I don't even see the two thousand dollars this is supposed to be a receipt for."
Jackson, who was standing behind McLeod, grabbed his arm and twisted. "Sign!" His voice was a snarl in McLeod's ear.
Eventually, of course, he signed.
* * * * *
"'Nother beer, Mac?" asked the bartender with a friendly smile.
"Yeah, Leo; thanks." McLeod pushed his quarter across the bar with one hand and scratched negligently at his beard with the fingers of the other. Nobody questioned him in this neighborhood. The beard, which had taken two months to grow, disguised his face, and he had given his name as McCaffery, allowing his landlord and others who heard it to make the natural assumption that he was of Irish descent.
He was waiting. He had been forced to move from his apartment; nobody wanted that dirty so-and-so, Professor McLeod, around. Besides, his money was running short. He had never seen the two thousand. "You'll get that when the Galactic bank cashes your royalty check," he had been told. He was waiting.
Not hiding. No. That wasn't possible. The U.B.I. could find him easily when they wanted him. There was no place he could have hidden from them for very long. A man needs friends to stay hidden from an efficient police organization for very long, and John Hamish McLeod had no friends. "Jack McCaffery" had, since he was a pleasant kind of fellow who made friends easily when he wanted them. But he had no illusions about his new friends. Let them once suspect, however faintly, that Good Old Jack McCaffery was really that Professor McLeod, and the game would be up.
The U.B.I. would find him again all right, whenever it wanted him. And McLeod hoped it would be soon because he was down to his last hundred bucks.
So he waited and thought about fifty thousand Galactic credits.
The mathematics was simple, but it conveyed an awful lot of information. To make fifty thousand credits from one thousandth of one percent royalties on a book selling at five credits the copy, one must needs sell a billion copies. Nothing to it.
\[ 5 \times 10^{-10} = 5 \times 10^{-5} \times 10^4 \]
Ergo: \[ X = 10 \times 10^9 \]
McLeod drew the equations on the bar with the tip of a wet forefinger, then rubbed them out quickly.
A billion copies in the first year. He should have seen it. He should have understood.
How many planets were there in the galaxy?
How many people on each planet?
Communication, even at ultralight velocities, would be necessarily slow. The galaxy was just too big to be compassed by the human mind—or even by the mind of a Galactic, McLeod suspected.
How do you publish a book for Galactic, for galaxy-wide, consumption? How long does it take to saturate the market on each planet? How long does it take to spread the book from planet to planet? How many people were there on each planet who would buy a good book? Or, at least, an entertaining one.
McLeod didn't know, but he suspected that the number was huge. McLeod was a zoologist, not an astronomer, but he read enough on astronomy to know that the estimated number of Earth-type planets alone—according to the
latest theory—ran into the tens of millions or hundreds of millions. The—

A man sat down on the stool next to McLeod and said something loud enough and foul enough to break the zoologist's train of thought.

"Gimme a shot, Leo," he added in an angry voice.

"Sure, Pete," the bartender said. "What's the trouble?"

"Tourists," Pete said with a snarl. "Laffin' attus alla time like we was monkeys inna zoo! Bunch 'em come inta
day." He downed his whiskey with a practiced flip of the wrist and slammed it on the bar. Leo refilled it immediately. "I shunt gripe, I guess. Gotta haffa credit offen 'em." He slapped down a five dollar bill as though it had somehow been contaminated.

The bar became oddly quiet. Everyone had heard Pete. Further, everyone had heard that another shipload of Galactics had landed and were, at the moment, enjoying the sights of New York. A few of them knew that Pete was the bell-captain in one of the big midtown hotels.

McLeod listened while Pete expounded on the shame he had had to undergo to earn half a credit—a lousy five bucks.

McLeod did some estimating. Tourists—the word had acquired an even more pejorative sense than it had before, and now applied only to Galactics—bought nothing, but they tipped for services, unless the services weren't wanted or needed. Pete had given them information that they hadn't had before—where to find a particular place. All in all, the group of fifteen Galactics had given out five or six credits in such tips. Say half a credit apiece. There were, perhaps, a hundred Galactics in this shipload. That meant fifty credits. Hm-m-m.

They didn't need anyone to carry their bags; they didn't need anyone to register them in hotels; they didn't need personal service of that kind. All they wanted to do was look. But they wouldn't pay for looking. They had no interest in Broadway plays or the acts in the night-clubs—at least, not enough to induce them to pay to see them. This particular group had wanted to see a hotel. They had wandered through it, looking at everything and laughing fit to kill at the carpets on the floor and the electric lighting and such. But when the management had hinted that payment for such services as letting them look should be forthcoming, they had handed half a credit to someone and walked out. Then they had gone to the corner of Fifty-first and Madison and looked for nothing.

Fifty credits for a shipload. Three shiploads a year. Hell, give 'em the benefit of the doubt and say ten shiploads a year. In a hundred years, they'd add another fifty thousand to Earth's resources.

McLeod grinned.

And waited.

They came for him, eventually, as McLeod had known they would.

But they came long before he had expected. He had given them six months at the least. They came for him at the end of the third month.

It was Jackson, of course. It would have to be Jackson. He walked into the cheap little room McLeod had rented, followed by his squad of men.

He tossed a peculiar envelope on the bed next to McLeod.

"Letter came for you, humorist. Open it."

McLeod sat on the edge of the bed and read the letter. The envelope had already been opened, which surprised him none.

It looked very much like an ordinary business letter—except that whatever they used for paper was whiter and tougher than the paper he used.

He was reminded of the time he had seen a reproduction of a Thirteenth Century manuscript alongside the original. The copy had been set up in a specially-designed type and printed on fine paper. The original had been handwritten on vellum.

McLeod had the feeling that if he used a microscope on this letter the lines and edges would be just as precise and clear as they appeared to the naked eye, instead of the fuzziness that ordinary print would show.

The way you tell a synthetic ruby from a natural ruby is to look for flaws. The synthetic doesn't have any.

This letter was a Galactic imitation of a Terran business letter.

It said:

Dear Mac,

I am happy to report that your book, "Interstellar Ark," is a smash hit. It looks as though it is on its way to becoming a best seller. As you already know by your royalty statement, over a billion copies were sold the first year. That indicates even better sales over the years to come as the reputation of the book spreads. Naturally, our advertising campaign will remain behind it all the way. Congratulations.

Speaking of royalty checks, there seems to be some sort of irregularity about yours. I am sorry, but according to
regulations the check must be validated in the presence of your Galactic Resident before it can be cashed. Your signature across the back of it doesn't mean anything to our bankers.

Just go to your Galactic Resident, and he'll be happy to take care of the matter for you. That's what he's there for. The next check should come through very shortly.

All the best,
Clem.

Better and better, McLeod thought. He hadn't expected to be able to do anything until his next royalty check arrived. But now--

He looked up at Jackson. "All right. What's next?"
"Come with us. We're flying to Hawaii. Get your hat and coat."

McLeod obeyed silently. At the moment, there was nothing else he could do. As a matter of fact, there was nothing he wanted to do more.

It was no trouble at all for Professor McLeod to get an audience with the Galactic Resident, but when he was escorted in by Jackson and his squad, the whole group was halted inside the front door.

The Resident, a tall, lean being with a leathery, gray face that somehow managed to look crocodilian in spite of the fact that his head was definitely humanoid in shape, peered at them from beneath pronounced supraorbital ridges. "Is this man under arrest?" he asked in a gravelly baritone.

"Er ... no," said Jackson. "No. He is merely in protective custody."

"He has not been convicted of any crime?"

"No sir," Jackson said. His voice sounded as though he were unsure of himself.

"That is well," said the Resident. "A convicted criminal cannot, of course, use the credits of society until he has become rehabilitated." He paused. "But why protective custody?"

"There are those," said Jackson, choosing his words with care, "who feel that Professor McLeod has brought disgrace upon the human race ... er ... the Terrestrial race. There is reason to believe that his life may be in danger."

McLeod smiled wryly. What Jackson said was true, but it was carefully calculated to mislead.

"I see," said the Resident. "It would appear to me that it would be simpler to inform the people that he has done no such thing; that, indeed, his work has conferred immense benefits upon your race. But that is your own affair. At any rate, he is in no danger here."

He didn't need to say anything else. Jackson knew the hint was an order and that he wouldn't get any farther with his squad.

McLeod spoke up. "Subject to your permission, sir, I would like to have Mr. Jackson with me."

The Galactic Resident smiled. "Of course, professor. Come in, both of you." He turned and led the way through the inner door.

Nobody bothered to search either of them, not even though they must know that Jackson was carrying a gun. McLeod was fairly certain that the gun would be useless to Jackson if he tried to assert his authority with it. If Clem had been able to render the U.B.I.'s eavesdropping apparatus inoperable, it was highly probable that the Galactic Resident would have some means of taking care of weapons.

"There are only a few formalities to go through," the Resident said pleasantly, indicating chairs with a gesture. The room he had led them to didn't look much different from that which would be expected in any tastefully furnished apartment in New York or Honolulu.

McLeod and Jackson sat down in a couple of comfortable easy-chairs while the Resident went around a large desk and sat down in a swivel chair behind it. He smiled a little and looked at McLeod. "Hm-m-m. Ah, yes. Very good." It was as though he had received information of some kind on an unknown subject through an unknown channel, McLeod thought. Evidently that was true, for his next words were: "You are not under the influence of drugs nor hypnotic compulsion, I see. Excellent, professor. Is it your desire that this check be converted to cash?"

He made a small gesture. "You have only to express it, you see. It would be difficult to explain it to you, but rest assured that such an expression of will--while you are sitting in that chair--is impressed upon the structure of the check itself and is the equivalent of a signature. Except, of course, that it is unforgeable."

"May I ask a few questions first?" McLeod said.

"Certainly, professor. I am here to answer your questions."

"This money--is it free and clear, or are there Galactic taxes to pay?"

If the Galactic Resident had had eyebrows, it is likely that they would have lifted in surprise. "My dear professor! Aside from the fact that we run our ... er ... government in an entirely different manner, we would consider it quite immoral to take what a man earns without giving services of an exact kind. I will charge you five credits for this validation, since I am rendering a service. The bank will take a full tenth of a percent in this case
because of the inconvenience of shipping cash over that long distance. The rest is yours to do with as you see fit."

Fifty-five credits out of fifty thousand, McLeod thought. Not bad at all. Aloud, he asked: "Could I, for instance, open a bank account or buy a ticket on a star-ship?"

"Why not? As I said, it is your money. You have earned it honestly; you may spend it honestly."

Jackson was staring at McLeod, but he said nothing.

"Tell me, sir," McLeod said, "how does the success of my book compare with the success of most books in the galaxy?"

"Quite favorably, I understand," said the Resident. "The usual income from a successful book is about five thousand credits a year. Some run even less than that. I'm not too familiar with the publishing business, you understand, but that is my impression. You are, by Galactic standards, a very wealthy man, professor. Fifty thousand a year is by no means a median income."

"Fifty thousand a year?"

"Yes. About that. I understand that in the publishing business one can depend on a life income that does not vary much from the initial period. If a book is successful in one area of the galaxy it will be equally successful in others."

"How long does it take to saturate the market?" McLeod asked with a touch of awe.

"Saturate the--? Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Well, let's see. Most publishing houses can't handle the advertising and marketing on more than a thousand planets at once--the job becomes too unwieldy. That would indicate that you sold an average of a million copies per planet, which is unusual but not ... ah ... miraculous. That is why you can depend on future sales, you see; over a thousand planets the differences in planetary tastes averages out.

"Now if your publishers continue to expand the publication at the rate of a thousand planets a year, your book should easily last for another century. They can't really expand that rapidly, of course, since the sales on the planets they have already covered will continue with diminishing success over the next several years. Actually, your publishers will continue to put a billion books a year on the market and expand to new planets at a rate that will balance the loss of sales on the planets where it has already run its course. Yes, professor, you will have a good income for life."

"What about my heirs?"

"Heirs?" The Galactic Resident blinked. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"My relatives. Anyone who will inherit my property after my death."

The Resident still looked puzzled. "What about them?"

"How long can they go on collecting? When does the copyright run out?"

The Galactic Resident's puzzlement vanished. "Oh my dear professor! Surely you see that it is impossible to ... er ... inherit money one hasn't earned! The income stops with your death. Your children or your wife have done nothing to earn that money. Why should it continue to be paid out after the earner has died? If you wish to make provisions for such persons during your lifetime, that is your business, but the provisions must be made out of money you have already earned."

"Who does get the income, then?" McLeod asked.

The Galactic Resident looked thoughtful. "Well, the best I can explain to you without going into arduous detail is to say that our ... er ... government gets it. 'Government' is not really the proper word in this context, since we have no government as you think of it. Let us merely say that such monies pass into a common exchequer from which ... er ... public servants like myself are paid."

McLeod had a vision of a British Crown Officer trying to explain to a New Guinea tribesman what he meant when he said that taxes go to the Crown. The tribesman would probably wonder why the Chief of the English Tribe kept cowrie shells under his hat.

"I see. And if I am imprisoned for crime?" he asked.

"The payments are suspended until the ... er ... rehabilitation is complete. That is, until you are legally released."

"Is there anything else that can stop the payments?"

"Not unless the publishing company fails--which is highly unlikely. Of course, a man under hypnotic compulsion or drugs is not considered legally responsible, so he cannot transact any legal business while he is in that state, but the checks are merely held for him until that impediment is removed."

"I see." McLeod nodded.

He knew perfectly well that he no more understood the entire workings of the Galactic civilization than that New Guinea tribesman understood the civilization of Great Britain, but he also knew that he understood more of it than Jackson, for instance, did. McLeod had been able to foresee a little of what the Resident had said.

"Would you do me the service, sir," McLeod said, "of opening a bank account for me in some local bank?"
"Yes, of course. As Resident, I am empowered to transact business for you at your request. My fees are quite reasonable. All checks will have to go through me, of course, but ... hm-m-m ... I think in this case a twentieth of a per cent would be appropriate. You will be handling fairly large amounts. If that is your wish, I shall so arrange it."

"Hey!" Jackson found his tongue. "The Earth Union Government has a claim on that! McLeod owes forty-nine thousand Galactic credits in income taxes!"

If the Galactic Resident was shocked at the intimation that the Galactic "government" would take earned money from a man, the announcement that Earth's government did so was no surprise to him at all. "If that is so, I am certain that Professor McLeod will behave as a law-abiding citizen. He can authorize a check for that amount, and it will be honored by his bank. We have no desire to interfere with local customs."

"I am certain that I can come to an equitable arrangement with the Earth authorities," said McLeod, rising from his chair. "Is there anything I have to sign or--"

"No, no. You have expressed your will. Thank you, Professor McLeod; it is a pleasure to do business with you."

"Thank you. The pleasure is mutual. Come on, Jackson, we don't need to bother the Resident any more just now."

"But--"

"Come on, I said! I want a few words with you!" McLeod insisted.

Jackson sensed that there would be no point in arguing any further with the Resident, but he followed McLeod out into the bright Hawaiian sunshine with a dull glow of anger burning in his cheeks. Accompanied by the squad, they climbed into the car and left.

* * * * *

As soon as they were well away from the Residence, Jackson grabbed McLeod by the lapel of his jacket. "All right, humorist! What was the idea of that? Are you trying to make things hard for yourself?"

"No, but you are," McLeod said in a cold voice. "Get your hands off me. I may get you fired anyway, just because you're a louse, but if you keep acting like this, I'll see that they toss you into solitary and toss the key away."

"What are you talking about?" But he released his hold.

"Just think about it, Jackson. The Government can't get its hands on that money unless I permit it. As I said, we'll arrive at an equitable arrangement. And that will be a damn sight less than ninety-eight percent of my earnings, believe me."

"If you refuse to pay, we'll--" He stopped suddenly.

"--Throw me in jail?" McLeod shook his head. "You can't get money while I'm in jail."

"We'll wait," said Jackson firmly. "After a little while in a cell, you'll listen to reason and will sign those checks."

"You don't think very well, do you, Jackson? To 'sign' a check, I have to go to the Galactic Resident. As soon as you take me to him, I authorize a check to buy me a ticket for some nice planet where there are no income taxes."

Jackson opened his mouth and shut it again, frowning.

"Think about it, Jackson," McLeod continued. "Nobody can get that money from me without my consent. Now it so happens that I want to help Earth; I have a certain perversity for the human race, even though it is inconceivably backward by Galactic standards. We have about as much chance of ever becoming of any importance on the Galactic scale as the Australian aborigine has of becoming important in world politics, but a few thousand years of evolution may bring out a few individuals who have the ability to do something. I'm not sure. But I'm damned if I'll let the boneheads run all over me while they steal the gold."

"Earth has no other source of income. None. Tourists are few and far between and they spend almost nothing. As long as I am alive and in good health and out of prison, Earth will have a nice steady income of fifty thousand Galactic credits a year."

"Earth has no other source of income. None. Tourists are few and far between and they spend almost nothing. As long as I am alive and in good health and out of prison, Earth will have a nice steady income of fifty thousand Galactic credits a year."

"Earth, I said. Not the Government, except indirectly. I intend to see that my money isn't confiscated." He had a few other plans, too, but he saw no necessity of mentioning them to Jackson.

"If I don't like the way the Government behaves, I'll simply shut off the source of supply. Understand, Jackson?"

"Um-m-m," said Jackson. He understood, he didn't like it, and he didn't know what to do about it.

"One of the first things we're going to do is start a little 'information' flowing," McLeod said. "I don't care to live on a planet where everybody hates my guts, so, as the Resident suggested, we're going to have to start a
propaganda campaign to counteract the one that denounced me. For that, I'll want to talk to someone a little higher in the Government. You'd better take me to the head of the U.B.I. He'll know who I should speak to for that purpose."

Jackson still looked dazed, but it had evidently penetrated that McLeod had the upper hand. "Wha ... er ... what did you say, sir?" he asked, partially coming out of his daze.

McLeod sighed.
"Take me to your leader," he said patiently.

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Contents

A WORLD IS BORN
by LEIGH BRACKETT

The first ripples of blue fire touched Dio's men. Bolts of it fastened on gun-butts, and knuckles. Men screamed and fell. Jill cried out as he tore silver ornaments from her dress.

Mel Gray flung down his hoe with a sudden tigerish fierceness and stood erect. Tom Ward, working beside him, glanced at Gray's Indianesque profile, the youth of it hardened by war and the hells of the Eros prison blocks. A quick flash of satisfaction crossed Ward's dark eyes. Then he grinned and said mockingly.
"Hell of a place to spend the rest of your life, ain't it?"

Mel Gray stared with slitted blue eyes down the valley. The huge sun of Mercury seared his naked body. Sweat channeled the dust on his skin. His throat ached with thirst. And the bitter landscape mocked him more than Wade's dark face.
"The rest of my life," he repeated softly. "The rest of my life!"

He was twenty-eight.

"Shut up!" Fury rose in Gray, hotter than the boiling springs that ran from the Sunside to water the valleys. He hated Mercury. He hated John Moulton and his daughter Jill, who had conceived this plan of building a new world for the destitute and desperate veterans of the Second Interplanetary War.

"I've had enough 'unsselfish service'," he whispered. "I'm serving myself from now on."

Escape. That was all he wanted. Escape from these stifling valleys, from the snarl of the wind in the barren crags that towered higher than Everest into airless space. Escape from the surveillance of the twenty guards, the forced companionship of the ninety-nine other veteran-convicts.

Wade poked at the furrows between the sturdy hybrid tubers. "It ain't possible, kid. Not even for 'Duke' Gray, the 'light-fingered genius who held the Interstellar Police at a standstill for five years'." He laughed. "I read your publicity."

Gray stroked slow, earth-stained fingers over his sleek cap of yellow hair. "You think so?" he asked softly.

Dio the Martian came down the furrow, his lean, wiry figure silhouetted against the upper panorama of the valley; the neat rows of vegetables and the green riot of Venusian wheat, dotted with toiling men and their friendly guards.

Dio's green, narrowed eyes studied Gray's hard face.
"What's the matter, Gray? Trying to start something?"

"Suppose I were?" asked Gray silkily. Dio was the unofficial leader of the convict-veterans. There was about his thin body and hatchet face some of the grim determination that had made the Martians cling to their dying world and bring life to it again.

"You volunteered, like the rest of us," said the Martian. "Haven't you the guts to stick it?"

"The hell I volunteered! The IPA sent me. And what's it to you?"

"Only this." Dio's green eyes were slitted and ugly. "You've only been here a month. The rest of us came nearly a year ago--because we wanted to. We've worked like slaves, because we wanted to. In three weeks the crops will be in. The Moulton Project will be self-supporting. Moulton will get his permanent charter, and we'll be on our way.

"There are ninety-nine of us, Gray, who want the Moulton Project to succeed. We know that that louse Caron of Mars doesn't want it to, since pitchblende was discovered. We don't know whether you're working for him or not, but you're a troublemaker.

"There isn't to be any trouble, Gray. We're not giving the Interplanetary Prison Authority any excuse to revoke its decision and give Caron of Mars a free hand here. We'll see to anyone who tries it. Understand?"
Mel Gray took one slow step forward, but Ward's sharp, "Stow it! A guard," stopped him. The Martian worked back up the furrow. The guard, reassured, strolled back up the valley, squinting at the jagged streak of pale-grey sky that was going black as low clouds formed, only a few hundred feet above the copper cables that ran from cliff to cliff high over their heads.

"Another storm," growled Ward. "It gets worse as Mercury enters perihelion. Lovely world, ain't it?"

"Why did you volunteer?" asked Gray, picking up his hoe.

Ward shrugged. "I had my reasons."

Gray voiced the question that had troubled him since his transfer. "There were hundreds on the waiting list to replace the man who died. Why did they send me, instead?"

"Some fool blunder," said Ward carelessly. And then, in the same casual tone, "You mean it, about escaping?"

Gray stared at him. "What's it to you?"

Ward moved closer. "I can help you?"

A stab of mingled hope and wary suspicion transfixed Gray's heart. Ward's dark face grinned briefly into his, with a flash of secretive black eyes, and Gray was conscious of distrust.

"What do you mean, help me?"

Dio was working closer, watching them. The first growl of thunder rattled against the cliff faces. It was dark now, the pink flames of the Dark-side aurora visible beyond the valley mouth.

"I've got--connections," returned Ward cryptically. "Interested?"

Gray hesitated. There was too much he couldn't understand. Moreover, he was a lone wolf. Had been since the Second Interplanetary War wrenched him from the quiet backwater of his country home an eternity of eight years before and hammered him into hardness--a cynic who trusted nobody and nothing but Mel 'Duke' Gray.

"If you have connections," he said slowly, "why don't you use 'em yourself?"

"I got my reasons." Again that secretive grin. "But it's no hide off you, is it? All you want is to get away."

That was true. It would do no harm to hear what Ward had to say.

Lightning burst overhead, streaking down to be caught and grounded by the copper cables. The livid flare showed Dio's face, hard with worry and determination. Gray nodded.

"Tonight, then," whispered Ward. "In the barracks."

Out from the cleft where Mel Gray worked, across the flat plain of rock stripped naked by the wind that raved across it, lay the deep valley that sheltered the heart of the Moulton Project.

Hot springs joined to form a steaming river. Vegetation grew savagely under the huge sun. The air, kept at almost constant temperature by the blanketing effect of the hot springs, was stagnant and heavy.

But up above, high over the copper cables that crossed every valley where men ventured, the eternal wind of Mercury screamed and snarled between the naked cliffs.

Three concrete domes crouched on the valley floor, housing barracks, tool-shops, kitchens, store-houses, and executive quarters, connected by underground passages. Beside the smallest dome, joined to it by a heavily barred tunnel, was an insulated hangar, containing the only space ship on Mercury turned from the quartzite window through which she had been watching the gathering storm overhead. The thunder from other valleys reached them as a dim barrage which, at this time of Mercury's year, was never still.

"I don't know," she said. "It seems that nothing can happen now, and yet.... It's been too easy."

"Easy!" snorted Moulton. "We've broken our backs fighting these valleys. And our nerves, fighting time. But we've licked 'em!"

He rose, shaggy grey hair tousled, grey eyes alight.

"I told the IPA those men weren't criminals. And I was right. They can't deny me the charter now. No matter how much Caron of Mars would like to get his claws on this radium."

He took Jill by the shoulders and shook her, laughing.

"Three weeks, girl, that's all. First crops ready for harvest, first pay-ore coming out of the mines. In three weeks my permanent charter will have to be granted, according to agreement, and then...."

"Jill," he added solemnly, "we're seeing the birth of a world."

"That's what frightens me." Jill glanced upward as the first flare of lightning struck down, followed by a crash of thunder that shook the dome.
"So much can happen at a birth. I wish the three weeks were over!"

"Nonsense, girl! What could possibly happen?"

She looked at the copper cables, burning with the electricity running along them, and thought of the one hundred and twenty-two souls in that narrow Twilight Belt--with the fierce heat of the Sunside before them and the spatial cold of the Shadow side at their backs, fighting against wind and storm and heat to build a world to replace the ones the War had taken from them.

"So much could happen," she whispered. "An accident, an escape...."

The inter-dome telescreen buzzed its signal. Jill, caught in a queer mood of premonition, went to it.

The face of Dio the Martian appeared on the screen, still wet and dirty from the storm-soaked fields, disheveled from his battle across the plain in the chaotic winds.

"I want to see you, Miss Moulton," he said. "There's something funny I think you ought to know."

"Of course," said Jill, and met her father's eyes. "I think we'll see, now, which one of us is right."

* * * * *

The barracks were quiet, except for the mutter of distant thunder and the heavy breathing of exhausted men. Tom Ward crouched in the darkness by Mel Gray's bunk.

"You ain't gonna go soft at the last minute, are you?" he whispered. "Because I can't afford to take chances."

"Don't worry," Gray returned grimly. "What's your proposition?"

"I can give you the combination to the lock of the hangar passage. All you have to do is get into Moulton's office, where the passage door is, and go to it. The ship's a two-seater. You can get her out of the valley easy."

Gray's eyes narrowed in the dark. "What's the catch?"

"There ain't none. I swear it."

"Look, Ward. I'm no fool. Who's behind this, and why?"

"That don't make no difference. All you want .... ow!"

Gray's fingers had fastened like steel claws on his wrist.

"I get it, now," said Gray slowly. "That's why I was sent here. Somebody wanted me to make trouble for Moulton." His fingers tightened agonizingly, and his voice sank to a slow drawl.

"I don't like being a pawn in somebody else's chess game."

"Okay, okay! It ain't my fault. Lemme go." Ward rubbed his bruised wrist. "Sure, somebody--I ain't sayin' who--sent you here, knowin' you'd want to escape. I'm here to help you. You get free, I get paid, the Big Boy gets what he wants. Okay?"

Gray was silent, scowling in the darkness. Then he said.

"All right. I'll take a chance."

"Then listen. You tell Moulton you have a complaint. I'll...."

Light flooded the dark as the door clanged open. Ward leaped like a startled rabbit, but the light speared him, held him. Ward felt a pulse of excitement beat up in him.

The long ominous shadows of the guards raised elongated guns. The barracks stirred and muttered, like a vast aviary waking.

"Ward and Gray," said one of the guards. "Moulton wants you."

Gray rose from his bunk with the lithe, delicate grace of a cat. The monotony of sleep and labor was ended. Something had broken. Life was once again a moving thing.

* * * * *

John Moulton sat behind the untidy desk. Dio the Martian sat grimly against the wall. There was a guard beside him, watching.

Mel Gray noted all this as he and Ward came in. But his cynical blue eyes went beyond, to a door with a ponderous combination lock. Then they were attracted by something else--the tall, slim figure standing against the black quartz panes of the far wall.

It was the first time he had seen Jill Moulton. She looked the perfect sober apostle of righteousness he'd learned to mock. And then he saw the soft cluster of black curls, the curve of her throat above the dark dress, the red lips that balanced her determined jaw and direct grey eyes.

Moulton spoke, his shaggy head hunched between his shoulders.

"Dio tells me that you, Gray, are not a volunteer."

"Tattletale," said Gray. He was gauging the distance to the hangar door, the positions of the guards, the time it would take to spin out the combination. And he knew he couldn't do it.

"What were you and Ward up to when the guards came?"

"I couldn't sleep," said Gray amiably. "He was telling me bedtime stories." Jill Moulton was lovely, he couldn't deny that. Lovely, but not soft. She gave him an idea.
Moulton's jaw clamped. "Cut the comedy, Gray. Are you working for Caron of Mars?"

Caron of Mars, chairman of the board of the Interplanetary Prison Authority. Dio had mentioned him. Gray
smiled in understanding. Caron of Mars had sent him, Gray, to Mercury. Caron of Mars was helping him, through
Ward, to escape. Caron of Mars wanted Mercury for his own purposes—and he could have it.

"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Moulton," he said gravely, "Caron of Mars is working for me."

He caught Ward's sharp hiss of remonstrance. Then Jill Moulton stepped forward.

"Perhaps he doesn't understand what he's doing, Father." Her eyes met Gray's. "You want to escape, don't you?"

Gray studied her, grinning as the slow rose flushed her skin, the corners of her mouth tightening with anger.

"Go on," he said. "You have a nice voice."

Her eyes narrowed, but she held her temper.

"You must know what that would mean, Gray. There are thousands of veterans in the prisons now. Their
offenses are mostly trivial, but the Prison Authority can't let them go, because they have no jobs, no homes, no
money.

"The valleys here are fertile. There are mines rich in copper and pitchblende. The men have a chance for a
home and a job, a part in building a new world. We hope to make Mercury an independent, self-governing member
of the League of Worlds."

"With the Moultons as rulers, of course," Gray murmured.

"If they want us," answered Jill, deliberately missing the point. "Do you think you have the right to destroy all
we've worked for?"

Gray was silent. Rather grimly, she went on.

"Caron of Mars would like to see us defeated. He didn't care about Mercury before radium was discovered. But
now he'd like to turn it into a prison mining community, with convict labor, leasing mine grants to corporations and
cleaning up big fortunes for himself and his associates.

"Any trouble here will give him an excuse to say that we've failed, that the Project is a menace to the Solar
System. If you try to escape, you wreck everything we've done. If you don't tell the truth, you may cost thousands of
men their futures.

"Do you understand? Will you cooperate?"

Gray said evenly, "I'm my own keeper, now. My brother will have to take care of himself."

It was ridiculously easy, she was so earnest, so close to him. He had a brief kaleidoscope of impressions--
Ward's sullen bewilderment, Moulton's angry roar, Dio's jerky rise to his feet as the guards grabbed for their guns.

Then he had his hands around her slim, firm throat, her body pressed close to his, serving as a shield against
bullets.

"Don't be rash," he told them all quietly. "I can break her neck quite easily, if I have to. Ward, unlock that
door."

In utter silence, Ward darted over and began to spin the dial. At last he said, "Okay, c'mon."

Gray realized that he was sweating. Jill was like warm, rigid marble in his hands. And he had another idea.

"I'm going to take the girl as a hostage," he announced. "If I get safely away, she'll be turned loose, her health
and virtue still intact. Good night."

The clang of the heavy door had a comforting sound behind them.

* * * *

The ship was a commercial job, fairly slow but sturdy. Gray strapped Jill Moulton into one of the bucket seats
in the control room and then checked the fuel and air gauges. The tanks were full.

"What about you?" he said to Ward. "You can't go back."

"Nah. I'll have to go with you. Warm her up, Duke, while I open the dome."

He darted out. Gray set the atmosphere motors idling. The dome slid open, showing the flicker of the auroras,
where areas of intense heat and cold set up atmospheric tension by rapid fluctuation of adjoining air masses.

Mercury, cutting the vast magnetic field of the Sun in an eccentric orbit, tortured by the daily change from
blistering heat to freezing cold in the thin atmosphere, was a powerful generator of electricity.

Ward didn't come back.

Swearing under his breath, tense for the sound of pursuit in spite of the girl, Gray went to look. Out beyond the
hangar, he saw a figure running.

Running hard up into the narrowing cleft of the valley, where natural galleries in the rock of Mercury led to the
places where the copper cables were anchored, and farther, into the unexplored mystery of the caves.

Gray scowled, his arrogant Roman profile hard against the flickering aurora. Then he slammed the lock shut.

The ship roared out into the tearing winds of the plain. Gray cut in his rockets and blasted up, into the airless
dark among the high peaks.
Jill Moulton hadn't moved or spoken.
Gray snapped on the space radio, leaving his own screen dark. Presently he picked up signals in a code he didn't know.
"Listen," he said. "I knew there was some reason for Ward's running out on me."
His Indiansque face hardened. "So that's the game! They want to make trouble for you by letting me escape and then make themselves heroes by bringing me in, preferably dead.
"They've got ships waiting to get me as soon as I clear Mercury, and they're getting stand-by instructions from somebody on the ground. The somebody that Ward was making for."
Jill's breath made a small hiss. "Somebody's near the Project...."
Gray snapped on his transmitter.
"Duke Gray, calling all ships off Mercury. Will the flagship of your reception committee please come in?"
His screen flickered to life. A man's face appeared—the middle-aged, soft-fleshed, almost stickily innocent face of one of the Solar Systems greatest crusaders against vice and crime.
Jill Moulton gasped. "Caron of Mars!"
"Ward gave the game away," said Gray gently. "Too bad."
The face of Caron of Mars never changed expression. But behind those flesh-hooded eyes was a cunning brain, working at top speed.
"I have a passenger," Gray went on. "Miss Jill Moulton. I'm responsible for her safety, and I'd hate to have her inconvenienced."
The tip of a pale tongue flicked across Caron's pale lips.
"That is a pity," he said, with the intonation of a preaching minister. "But I cannot stop the machinery set in motion...."
"And besides," finished Gray acidly, "you think that if Jill Moulton dies with me, it'll break John Moulton so he won't fight you at all."
His lean hand poised on the switch.
"All right, you putrid flesh-tub. Try and catch us!"
The screen went dead. Gray hunched over the controls. If he could get past them, lose himself in the glare of the Sun....
He looked aside at the stony-faced girl beside him. She was studying him contemptuously out of hard gray eyes.
"How," she said slowly, "can you be such a callous swine?"
"Callous?" He controlled the quite unreasonable anger that rose in him. "Not at all. The war taught me that if I didn't look out for myself, no one would."
"And yet you must have started out a human being."
He laughed.
The ship burst into searing sunlight. The Sunside of Mercury blazed below them. Out toward the velvet dark of space the side of a waiting ship flashed burning silver.
Even as he watched, the flare of its rockets arced against the blackness. They had been sighted.
Gray's practised eye gauged the stranger's speed against his own, and he cursed softly. Abruptly he wheeled the ship and started down again, cutting his rockets as the shadow swallowed them. The ship was eerily silent, dropping with a rising scream as the atmosphere touched the hull.
"What are you going to do?" asked Jill almost too quietly.
He didn't answer. Maneuvering the ship on velocity between those stupendous pinnacles took all his attention.
Caron, at least, couldn't follow him in the dark without exhaust flares as guides.
They swept across the wind-torn plain, into the mouth of the valley where Gray had worked, braking hard to a stop under the cables.
"You might have got past them," said Jill.
"One chance in a hundred."
Her mouth twisted. "Afraid to take it?"
He smiled harshly. "I haven't yet reached the stage where I kill women. You'll be safe here--the men will find you in the morning. I'm going back, alone."
"Safe!" she said bitterly. "For what? No matter what happens, the Project is ruined."
"Don't worry," he told her brutally. "You'll find some other way to make a living."
Her eyes blazed. "You think that's all its means to us? Just money and power?" She whispered, "I hope they kill you, Duke Gray!"
* * * * *
He rose lazily and opened the air lock, then turned and freed her. And, sharply, the valley was bathed in a burst of light.

"Damn!" Gray picked up the sound of air motors overhead. "They must have had infra-red search beams. Well, that does it. We'll have to run for it, since this bus isn't armed."

With eerie irrelevancy, the teleradio buzzed. At this time of night, after the evening storms, some communication was possible.

Gray had a hunch. He opened the switch, and the face of John Moulton appeared on the screen. It was white and oddly still.

"Our guards saw your ship cross the plain," said Moulton quietly. "The men of the Project, led by Dio, are coming for you. I sent them, because I have decided that the life of my daughter is less important than the lives of many thousands of people.

"I appeal to you, Gray, to let her go. Her life won't save you. And it's very precious to me."

Caron's ship swept over, low above the cables, and the grinding concussion of a bomb lifted the ship, hurled it down with the stern end twisted to uselessness. The screen went dead.

Gray caught the half stunned girl. "I wish to heaven I could get rid of you!" he grated. "And I don't know why I don't!"

But she was with him when he set out down the valley, making for the cliff caves, up where the copper cables were anchored.

Caron's ship, a fast, small fighter, wheeled between the cliffs and turned back. Gray dropped flat, holding the girl down. Bombs pelted them with dirt and uprooted vegetables, started fires in the wheat. The pilot found a big enough break in the cables and came in for a landing.

Gray was up and running again. He knew the way into the explored galleries. From there on, it was anybody's guess.

Caron was brazen enough about it. The subtle way had failed. Now he was going all out. And he was really quite safe. With the broken cables to act as conductors, the first thunderstorm would obliterate all proof of his activities in this valley. Mercury, because of its high electrical potential, was cut off from communication with other worlds. Moulton, even if he had knowledge of what went on, could not send for help.

Gray wondered briefly what Caron intended to do in case he, Gray, made good his escape. That outpost in the main valley, for which Ward had been heading, wasn't kept for fun. Besides, Caron was too smart to have only one string to his bow.

Shouts, the spatter of shots around them. The narrow trail loomed above. Gray sent the girl scrambling up.

The sun burst up over the high peaks, leaving the black shadow of the valley still untouched. Caron's ship roared off. But six of its crew came after Gray and Jill Moulton.

* * * * *

The chill dark of the tunnel mouth swallowed them. Keeping right to avoid the great copper posts that held the cables, strung through holes drilled in the solid rock of the gallery's outer wall, Gray urged the girl along.

The cleft his hand was searching for opened. Drawing the girl inside, around a jutting shoulder, he stopped, listening.

Footsteps echoed outside, grew louder, swept by. There was no light. But the steps were too sure to have been made in the dark.

"Infra-red torches and goggles," Gray said tersely, "You see, but your quarry doesn't. Useful gadget. Come on."

"But where? What are you going to do?"

"Escape, girl. Remember? They smashed my ship. But there must be another one on Mercury. I'm going to find it."

"I don't understand."

"You probably never will. Here's where I leave you. That Martian Galahad will be along any minute. He'll take you home."

Her voice came soft and puzzled through the dark.

"I don't understand you, Gray. You wouldn't risk my life. Yet you're turning me loose, knowing that I might save you, knowing that I'll hunt you down if I can. I thought you were a hardened cynic."

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"If you were, you'd have kicked me out the waste tubs of the ship and gone on. You'd never have turned back."

"I told you," he said roughly, "I don't kill women." He turned away, but her harsh chuckle followed him.

"You're a fool, Gray. You've lost truth--and you aren't even true to your lie."

He paused, in swift anger. Voices the sound of running men, came up from the path. He broke into a silent run, following the dying echoes of Caron's men.
"Run, Gray!" cried Jill. "Because we're coming after you!"

The tunnels, ancient blowholes for the volcanic gases that had tortured Mercury with the raising of the titanic mountains, sprawled in a labyrinthine network through those same vast peaks. Only the galleries lying next the valleys had been explored. Man's habitation on Mercury had been too short.

Gray could hear Caron's men circling about through connecting tunnels, searching. It proved what he had already guessed. He was taking a desperate chance. But the way back was closed--and he was used to taking chances.

The geography of the district was clear in his mind--the valley he had just left and the main valley, forming an obtuse angle with the apex out on the wind-torn plain and a double range of mountains lying out between the sides of the triangle.

Somewhere there was a passage through those peaks. Somewhere there was a landing place, and ten to one there was a ship on it. Caron would never have left his men stranded, on the off chance that they might be discovered and used in evidence against him.

The men now hunting him knew their way through the tunnels, probably with the aid of markings that fluoresced under infra-red light. They were going to take him through, too.

They were coming closer. He waited far up in the main gallery, in the mouth of a side tunnel. Now, behind them, he could hear Dio's men. The noise of Caron's outfit stopped, then began again, softly.

Gray smiled, his sense of humor pleased. He tensed, waiting.

* * * * *

The rustle of cloth, the furtive creak of leather, the clink of metal equipment. Heavy breathing. Somebody whispered,

"Who the hell's that back there?"

"Must be men from the Project. We'd better hurry."

"We've got to find that damned Gray first," snapped the first voice grimly. "Caron'll burn us if we don't."

Gray counted six separate footsteps, trying to allow for the echoes. When he was sure the last man was by, he stepped out. The noise of Dio's hunt was growing--there must be a good many of them.

Covered by their own echoes, he stole up on the men ahead. His groping hand brushed gently against the clothing of the last man in the group. Gauging his distance swiftly, he went into action.

One hand fastened over the fellow's mouth. The other, holding a good-sized rock, struck down behind the ear. Gray eased the body down with scarcely a sound.

Their uniforms, he had noticed, were not too different from his prison garb. In a second he had stripped goggles, cap, and gun-belt from the body, and was striding after the others.

They moved like five eerie shadows now, in the queer light of the leader's lamp. Small fluorescent markings guided them. The last man grunted over his shoulder,

"What happened to you?"

"Stumbled," whispered Gray tersely, keeping his head down. A whisper is a good disguise for the voice. The other nodded.

"Don't straggle. No fun, getting lost in here."

The leader broke in. "We'll circle again. Be careful of that Project bunch--they'll be using ordinary light. And be quiet!"

They went, through connecting passages. The noise of Dio's party grew ominously loud. Abruptly, the leader swore.

"Caron or no Caron, he's gone. And we'd better go, too."

He turned off, down a different tunnel, and Gray heaved a sigh of relief, remembering the body he'd left in the open. For a time the noise of their pursuers grew remote. And then, suddenly, there was an echoing clamor of footsteps, and the glare of torches on the wall of a cross-passage ahead.

Voices came to Gray, distorted by the rock vaults.

"I'm sure I heard them, just then." It was Jill's voice.

"Yeah." That was Dio. "The trouble is, where?"

The footsteps halted. Then, "Let's try this passage. We don't want to get too far into this maze."

Caron's leader blasphemed softly and dodged into a side tunnel. The man next to Gray stumbled and cried out with pain as he struck the wall, and a shout rose behind them.

The leader broke off, running, twisting, turning, diving into the maze of smaller tunnels. The sounds of pursuit faded, were lost in the tomblike silence of the caves. One of the men laughed.

"We sure lost 'em!"

"Yeah," said the leader. "We lost 'em, all right." Gray caught the note of panic in his voice. "We lost the
markers, too."

"You mean...?"

"Yeah. Turning off like that did it. Unless we can find that marked tunnel, we're sunk!"

Gray, silent in the shadows, laughed a bitter, ironic laugh.

* * * * *

They went on, stumbling down endless black halls, losing all track of branching corridors, straining to catch the first glint of saving light. Once or twice they caught the echoes of Dio's party, and knew that they, too, were lost and wandering.

Then, quite suddenly, they came out into a vast gallery, running like a subway tube straight to left and right. A wind tore down it, hot as a draught from the burning gates of Hell.

It was a moment before anyone grasped the significance of that wind. Then someone shouted, "We're saved! All we have to do is walk against it!"

They turned left, almost running in the teeth of that searing blast. And Gray began to notice a peculiar thing.

The air was charged with electricity. His clothing stiffened and crackled. His hair crawled on his head. He could see the faint discharges of sparks from his companions.

Whether it was the effect of the charged air, or the reaction from the nervous strain of the past hours, Mel Gray began to be afraid.

Weary to exhaustion, they struggled on against the burning wind. And then they blundered out into a cave, huge as a cathedral, lighted by a queer, uncertain bluish light.

Gray caught the sharp smell of ozone. His whole body was tingling with electric tension. The bluish light seemed to be in indeterminate lumps scattered over the rocky floor. The rush of the wind under that tremendous vault was terrifying.

They stopped, Gray keeping to the background. Now was the time to evade his unconscious helpers. The moment they reached daylight, he'd be discovered.

Soft-footed as a cat, he was already hidden among the heavy shadows of the fluted walls when, he heard the voices.

They came from off to the right, a confused shout of men under fearful strain, growing louder and louder, underscored with the tramp of footsteps. Lights blazed suddenly in the cathedral dark, and from the mouth of a great tunnel some hundred yards away, the men of the Project poured into the cave.

And then, sharp and high and unexpected, a man screamed.

* * * * *

The lumps of blue light were moving. And a man had died. He lay on the rock, his flesh blackened jelly, with a rope of glowing light running from the metal of his gun butt to the metal buttons on his cap.

All across the vast floor of that cavern the slow, eerie ripple of motion grew. The scattered lumps melted and flowed together, converging in wavelets of blue flame upon the men.

The answer came to Gray. Those things were some form of energy-life, born of the tremendous electric tensions on Mercury. Like all electricity, they were attracted to metal.

In a sudden frenzy of motion, he ripped off his metal-framed goggles, his cap and gun-belt. The Moultons forbade metal because of the danger of lightning, and his boots were made of rubber, so he felt reasonably safe, but a tense fear ran in prickling waves across his skin.

Guns began to bark, their feeble thunder all but drowned in the vast rush of the wind. Bullets struck the oncoming waves of light with no more effect than the eruption of a shower of sparks. Gray's attention, somehow, was riveted on Jill, standing with Dio at the head of her men.

She wore ordinary light slippers, having been dressed only for indoors. And there were silver ornaments at waist and throat.

He might have escaped, then, quite unnoticed. Instead, for a reason even he couldn't understand, he ran for Jill Moulton.

The first ripples of blue fire touched the ranks of Dio's men. Bolts of it leaped upward to fasten upon gun-butts and the buckles of the cartridge belts. Men screamed, fell, and died.

An arm of the fire licked out, driving in behind Dio and the girl. The guns of Caron's four remaining men were silent, now.

Gray leaped over that hissing electric surf, running toward Jill. A hungry worm of light reared up, searching for Dio's gun. Gray's hand swept it down, to be instantly buried in a mass of glowing ropes. Dio's hatchet face snarled at him in startled anger.

Jill cried out as Gray tore the silver ornaments from her dress. "Throw down the guns!" he yelled. "It's metal they want!"
He heard his name shouted by men torn momentarily from their own terror. Dio cried, "Shoot him!" A few bullets whined past, but their immediate fear spoiled both aim and attention.

Gray caught up Jill and began to run, toward the tube from which the wind howled in the cave. Behind him, grimly, Dio followed.

The electric beasts didn't notice him. His insulated feet trampled through them, buried to the ankle in living flame, feeling queer tenuous bodies break and reform.

The wind met them like a physical barrier at the tunnel mouth. Gray put Jill down. The wind strangled him. He tore off his coat and wrapped it over the girl's head, using his shirt over his own. Jill, her black curls whipped straight, tried to fight back past him, and he saw Dio coming, bent double against the wind.

He saw something else. Something that made him grab Jill and point, his flesh crawling with swift, cold dread.

The electric beasts had finished their pleasure. The dead were cinders on the rock. The living had run back into the tunnels. And now the blue sea of fire was flowing again, straight toward the place where they stood.

It was flowing fast, and Gray sensed an urgency, an impersonal haste, as though a command had been laid upon those living ropes of flame.

The first dim rumble of thunder rolled down the wind. Gripping Jill, Gray turned up the tunnel.

The wind, compressed in that narrow throat of rock, beat them blind and breathless, beat them to their bellies, to crawl. How long it took them, they never knew.

But Gray caught glimpses of Dio the Martian crawling behind them, and behind him again, the relentless flow of the fire-things.

They floundered out onto a rocky slope, fell away beneath the suck of the wind, and lay still, gasping. It was hot. Thunder crashed abruptly, and lightning flared between the cliffs.

Gray felt a contracting of the heart. There were no cables.

Then he saw it--the small, fast fighter flying below them on a flat plateau. A cave mouth beside it had been closed with a plastic door. The ship was the one that had followed them. He guessed at another one behind the protecting door.

Raking the tumbled blond hair out of his eyes, Gray got up.

Jill was still sitting, her black curls bowed between her hands. There wasn't much time, but Gray yielded to impulse. Pulling her head back by the silken hair, he kissed her.

"If you ever get tired of virtue, sweetheart, look me up." But somehow he wasn't grinning, and he ran down the slope.

He was almost to the open lock of the ship when things began to happen. Dio staggered out of the wind-tunnel and sagged down beside Jill. Then, abruptly, the big door opened.

Five men came out--one in pilot's costume, two in nondescript apparel, one in expensive business clothes, and the fifth in dark prison garb.

Gray recognized the last two. Caron of Mars and the errant Ward.

They were evidently on the verge of leaving. But they looked cheerful. Caron's sickly-sweet face all but oozed honey, and Ward was grinning his rat's grin.

Thunder banged and rolled among the rocks. Lightning flared in the cloudy murk. Gray saw the hull of a second ship beyond the door. Then the newcomers had seen him, and the two on the slope.

Guns ripped out of holsters. Gray's heart began to pound slowly. He, and Jill and Dio, were caught on that naked slope, with the flood of electric death at their backs.

His Indianesque face hardened. Bullets whined round him as he turned back up the slope, but he ran doubled over, putting all his hope in the tricky, uncertain light.

Jill and the Martian crouched stiffly, not knowing where to turn. A flare of lightning showed Gray the first of the firethings, flowing out onto the ledge, hidden from the men below.

"Back into the cave!" he yelled. His urgent hand fairly lifted Dio. The Martian glared at him, then obeyed. Bullets snarled against the rock. The light was too bad for accurate shooting, but luck couldn't stay with them forever.

Gray glanced over his shoulder as they scrambled up on the ledge. Caron waited by his ship. Ward and the others were charging the slope. Gray's teeth gleamed in a cruel grin.

Sweeping Jill into his arms, he stepped into the lapping flow of fire. Dio swore viciously, but he followed. They started toward the cave mouth, staggering in the rush of the wind.

"For God's sake, don't fall," snapped Gray. "Here they come!"

The pilot and one of the nondescript men were the first over. They were into the river of fire before they knew, it, and then it was too late. One collapsed and was buried. The pilot fell backward, and then other man died under his
body, of a broken neck.

Ward stopped. Gray could see his face, dark and hard and calculating. He studied Gray and Dio, and the dead men. He turned and looked back at Caron. Then, deliberately, he stripped off his gun belt, threw down his gun, and waded into the river.

Gray remembered, then, that Ward too wore rubber boots, and had no metal on him.

* * * * *

Ward came on, the glowing ropes sliding surf-like around his boots. Very carefully. Gray handed Jill to Dio.

"If I die too," he said, "there's only Caron down there. He's too fat to stop you."

Jill spoke, but he turned his back. He was suddenly confused, and it was almost pleasant to be able to lose his confusion in fighting. Ward had stopped some five feet away. Now he untied the length of tough cord that served him for a belt.

Gray nodded. Ward would try to throw a twist around his ankle and trip him. Once his body touched those swarming creatures....

He tensed, watchfully. The rat's grin was set on Ward's dark face. The cord licked out.

But it caught Gray's throat instead of his ankle!

Ward laughed and braced himself. Cursing, Gray caught at the rope. But friction held it, and Ward pulled, hard. His face purpling, Gray could still commend Ward's strategy. In taking Gray off guard, he'd more than made up what he lost in point of leverage.

Letting his body go with the pull, Gray flung himself at Ward. Blood blinded him, his heart was pounding, but he thought he foresaw Ward's next move. He let himself be pulled almost within striking distance.

Then, as Ward stepped, aside, jerking the rope and thrusting out a tripping foot, Gray made a catlike shift of balance and bent over.

His hands almost touched that weird, flowing surf as they clasped Ward's boot. Throwing all his strength into the lift, he hurled Ward backward.

Ward screamed once and disappeared under the blue fire. Gray clawed the rope from his neck. And then, suddenly, the world began to sway under him. He knew he was falling.

Some one's hand caught him, held him up. Fighting down his vertigo as his breath came back, he saw that it was Jill.

"Why?" he gasped, but her answer was lost in a titanic roar of thunder. Lightning blasted down. Dio's voice reached him, thin and distant through the clamor.

"We'll be killed! These damn things will attract the bolts!"

It was true. All his work had been for nothing. Looking up into that low, angry sky, Gray knew he was going to die.

Quite irrelavently, Jill's words in the tunnel came back to him. "You're a fool ... lost truth ... not true to lie!"

Now, in this moment, she couldn't lie to him. He caught her shoulders cruelly, trying to read her eyes.

Very faintly through the uproar, he heard her. "I'm sorry for you, Gray. Good man, gone to waste."

Dio stifled a scream. Thunder crashed between the sounding boards of the cliffs. Gray looked up.

A titanic bolt of lightning shot down, straight for them. The burning blue surf was agitated, sending up pseudopods uncannily like worshipping arms. The bolt struck.

The air reeked of ozone, but Gray felt no shock. There was a hiss, a vast stirring of creatures around him. The blue light glowed, purpled.

Another bolt struck down, and another, and still they were not dead. The fire-things had become a writhing, joyous tangle of tenuous bodies, glowing bright and brighter.

Stunned, incredulous, the three humans stood. The light was now an eye-searing violet. Static electricity tingled through them in eerie waves. But they were not burned.

"My God," whispered Gray. "They eat it. They eat lightning!"

Not daring to move, they stood watching that miracle of alien life, the feeding of living things on raw current. And when the last bolt had struck, the tide turned and rolled back down the wind-tunnel, a blinding river of living light.

Silently, the three humans went down the rocky slope to where Caron of Mars cowered in the silver ship. No bolt had come near it. And now Caron came to meet them.

His face was pasty with fear, but the old cunning still lurked in his eyes.

"Gray," he said. "I have an offer to make."

"Well?"

"You killed my pilot," said Caron suavely. "I can't fly, myself. Take me off, and I'll pay you anything you want."
"In bullets," retorted Gray. "You won't want witnesses to this."
"Circumstances force me. Physically, you have the advantage."
Jill's fingers caught his arm. "Don't, Gray! The Project...."
Caron faced her. "The Project is doomed in any case. My men carried out my secondary instructions. All the
cables in your valley have been cut. There is a storm now ready to break.
"In fifteen minutes or so, everything will be destroyed, except the domes. Regrettable, but...." He shrugged.
Jill's temper blazed, choking her so that she could hardly speak.
"Look at him, Gray," she whispered. "That's what you're so proud of being. A cynic, who believes in nothing
but himself. Look at him!"
Gray turned on her.
"Damn you!" he grated. "Do you expect me to believe you, with the world full of hypocrites like him?"
Her eyes stopped him. He remembered Moulton, pleading for her life. He remembered how she had looked
back there at the tunnel, when they had been sure of death. Some of his assurance was shaken.
"Listen," he said harshly. "I can save your valley. There's a chance in a million of coming out alive. Will you
die for what you believe in?"
She hesitated, just for a second. Then she looked at Dio and said, "Yes."
Gray turned. Almost lazily, his fist snapped up and took Caron on his flabby jaw.
"Take care of him, Dio," he grunted. Then he entered the ship, herding the white-faced girl before him.

* * * * *
The ship hurtled up into airless space, where the blinding sunlight lay in sharp shadows on the rock. Over the
ridge and down again, with the Project hidden under a surf of storm-clouds.
Cutting in the air motors, Gray dropped. Black, bellowing darkness swallowed them. Then he saw the valley,
with the copper cables fallen, and the wheat already on fire in several places.
Flying with every bit of his skill, he sought the narrowest part of the valley and flipped over in a racking loop.
The stern tubes hit rock. The nose slammed down on the opposite wall, wedging the ship by sheer weight.
Lightning gathered in a vast javelin and flamed down upon them. Jill flinched and caught her breath. The flame
hisssed along the hull and vanished into seared and blackened rock.
"Still willing to die for principle?" asked Gray brutally.
She glared at him. "Yes," she snapped. "But I hate having to die in your company!"
She looked down at the valley. Lightning struck with monotonous regularity on the hull, but the valley was
untouched. Jill smiled, though her face was white, her body rigid with waiting.
It was the smile that did it. Gray looked at her, her tousled black curls, the lithe young curves of throat and
breast. He leaned back in his seat, scowling out at the storm.
"Relax," he said. "You aren't going to die."
She turned on him, not daring to speak. He went on, slowly.
"The only chance you took was in the landing. We're acting as lightning rod for the whole valley, being the
highest and best conductor. But, as a man named Faraday proved, the charge resides on the surface of the conductor.
We're perfectly safe."
"How dared you!" she whispered.
He faced her, almost angrily.
"You knocked the props out from under my philosophy. I've had enough hypocritical eyewash. I had to prove
you. Well, I have."
She was quiet for some time. Then she said, "I understand, Duke. I'm glad. And now what, for you?"
He shrugged wryly.
"I don't know. I can still take Caron's other ship and escape. But I don't think I want to. I think perhaps I'll stick
around and give virtue another whirl."
Smoothing back his sleek fair hair, he shot her a sparkling look from under his hands.
"I won't," he added softly, "even mind going to Sunday School, if you were the teacher."
ACCIDENTAL DEATH
by Peter Baily

The most dangerous of weapons is the one you don't know is loaded.

The wind howled out of the northwest, blind with snow and barbed with ice crystals. All the way up the half-mile precipice it fingered and wrenched away at groaning ice-slabs. It screamed over the top, whirled snow in a dervish dance around the hollow there, piled snow into the long furrow plowed ruler-straight through streamlined hummocks of snow.

The sun glinted on black rock glazed by ice, chasms and ridges and bridges of ice. It lit the snow slope to a frozen glare, penciled black shadow down the long furrow, and flashed at the furrow's end on a thing of metal and plastics, an artifact thrown down in the dead wilderness.

Nothing grew, nothing flew, nothing walked, nothing talked. But the thing in the hollow was stirring in stiff jerks like a snake with its back broken or a clockwork toy running down. When the movements stopped, there was a click and a strange sound began. Thin, scratchy, inaudible more than a yard away, weary but still cocky, there leaked from the shape in the hollow the sound of a human voice.

"I've tried my hands and arms and they seem to work," it began. "I've wiggled my toes with entire success. It's well on the cards that I'm all in one piece and not broken up at all, though I don't see how it could happen. Right now I don't feel like struggling up and finding out. I'm fine where I am. I'll just lie here for a while and relax, and get some of the story on tape. This suit's got a built-in recorder, I might as well use it. That way even if I'm not as well as I feel, I'll leave a message. You probably know we're back and wonder what went wrong.

"I suppose I'm in a state of shock. That's why I can't seem to get up. Who wouldn't be shocked after luck like that?

"I've always been lucky, I guess. Luck got me a place in the Whale. Sure I'm a good astronomer but so are lots of other guys. If I were ten years older, it would have been an honor, being picked for the first long jump in the first starship ever. At my age it was luck.

"You'll want to know if the ship worked. Well, she did. Went like a bomb. We got lined up between Earth and Mars, you'll remember, and James pushed the button marked 'Jump'. Took his finger off the button and there we were: Alpha Centauri. Two months later your time, one second later by us. We covered our whole survey assignment like that, smooth as a pint of old and mild which right now I could certainly use. Better yet would be a pint of hot black coffee with sugar in. Failing that, I could even go for a long drink of cold water. There was never anything wrong with the Whale till right at the end and even then I doubt if it was the ship itself that fouled things up.

"That was some survey assignment. We astronomers really lived. Wait till you see--but of course you won't. I could weep when I think of those miles of lovely color film, all gone up in smoke.

* * * * *

"I'm shocked all right. I never said who I was. Matt Hennessy, from Farside Observatory, back of the Moon, just back from a proving flight cum astronomical survey in the starship Whale. Whoever you are who finds this tape, you're made. Take it to any radio station or newspaper office. You'll find you can name your price and don't take any wooden nickels.

"Where had I got to? I'd told you how we happened to find Chang, hadn't I? That's what the natives called it. Walking, talking natives on a blue sky planet with 1.1 g gravity and a twenty per cent oxygen atmosphere at fifteen p.s.i. The odds against finding Chang on a six-sun survey on the first star jump ever must be up in the googols. We certainly were lucky.

"The Chang natives aren't very technical--haven't got space travel for instance. They're good astronomers, though. We were able to show them our sun, in their telescopes. In their way, they're a highly civilized people. Look more like cats than people, but they're people all right. If you doubt it, chew these facts over.

"One, they learned our language in four weeks. When I say they, I mean a ten-man team of them.

"Two, they brew a near-beer that's a lot nearer than the canned stuff we had aboard the Whale.

"Three, they've a great sense of humor. Ran rather to silly practical jokes, but still. Can't say I care for that hot-foot and belly-laugh stuff myself, but tastes differ.

"Four, the ten-man language team also learned chess and table tennis.

"But why go on? People who talk English, drink beer, like jokes and beat me at chess or table-tennis are people
for my money, even if they look like tigers in trousers.

"It was funny the way they won all the time at table tennis. They certainly weren't so hot at it. Maybe that ten per cent extra gravity put us off our strokes. As for chess, Svendlov was our champion. He won sometimes. The rest of us seemed to lose whichever Chingsi we played. There again it wasn't so much that they were good. How could they be, in the time? It was more that we all seemed to make silly mistakes when we played them and that's fatal in chess. Of course it's a screwy situation, playing chess with something that grows its own fur coat, has yellow eyes an inch and a half long and long white whiskers. Could you have kept your mind on the game?

"And don't think I fell victim to their feline charm. The children were pets, but you didn't feel like patting the adults on their big grinning heads. Personally I didn't like the one I knew best. He was called--well, we called him Charley, and he was the ethnologist, ambassador, contact man, or whatever you like to call him, who came back with us. Why I disliked him was because he was always trying to get the edge on you. All the time he had to be top. Great sense of humor, of course. I nearly broke my neck on that butter-slide he fixed up in the metal alleyway to the Whale's engine room. Charley laughed fit to bust, everyone laughed, I even laughed myself though doing it hurt me more than the tumble had. Yes, life and soul of the party, old Charley ..."

"My last sight of the Minnow was a cabin full of dead and dying men, the sweetish stink of burned flesh and the choking reek of scorching insulation, the boat jolting and shuddering and beginning to break up, and in the middle of the flames, still unhurt, was Charley. He was laughing ..."

"My God, it's dark out here. Wonder how high I am. Must be all of fifty miles, and doing eight hundred miles an hour at least. I'll be doing more than that when I land. What's final velocity for a fifty-mile fall? Same as a fifty thousand mile fall, I suppose; same as escape; twenty-four thousand miles an hour. I'll make a mess ...

* * * * *

"That's better. Why didn't I close my eyes before? Those star streaks made me dizzy. I'll make a nice shooting star when I hit air. Come to think of it, I must be deep in air now. Let's take a look.

"It's getting lighter. Look at those peaks down there! Like great knives. I don't seem to be falling as fast as I expected though. Almost seem to be floating. Let's switch on the radio and tell the world hello. Hello, earth ... hello, again ... and good-by ...

"Sorry about that. I passed out. I don't know what I said, if anything, and the suit recorder has no playback or eraser. What must have happened is that the suit ran out of oxygen, and I lost consciousness due to anoxia. I dreamed I switched on the radio, but I actually switched on the emergency tank, thank the Lord, and that brought me round.

"Come to think of it, why not crack the suit and breath fresh air instead of bottled?

"No. I'd have to get up to do that. I think I'll just lie here a little bit longer and get properly rested up before I try anything big like standing up.

"I was telling about the return journey, wasn't I? The long jump back home, which should have dumped us between the orbits of Earth and Mars. Instead of which, when James took his finger off the button, the mass-detector showed nothing except the noise-level of the universe.

"We were out in that no place for a day. We astronomers had to establish our exact position relative to the solar system. The crew had to find out exactly what went wrong. The physicists had to make mystic passes in front of meters and mutter about residual folds in stress-free space. Our task was easy, because we were about half a light-year from the sun. The crew's job was also easy: they found what went wrong in less than half an hour.

"It still seems incredible. To program the ship for a star-jump, you merely told it where you were and where you wanted to go. In practical terms, that entailed first a series of exact measurements which had to be translated into the somewhat abstruse co-ordinate system we used based on the topological order of mass-points in the galaxy. Then you cut a tape on the computer and hit the button. Nothing was wrong with the computer. Nothing was wrong with the engines. We'd hit the right button and we'd gone to the place we'd aimed for. All we'd done was aim for the right place. It hurts me to tell you this and I'm just attached personnel with no space-flight tradition. In practical terms, one highly trained crew member had punched a wrong pattern of holes on the tape. Another equally skilled had failed to notice this when reading back. A childish error, highly improbable; twice repeated, thus squaring the improbability. Incredible, but that's what happened.

"Anyway, we took good care with the next lot of measurements. That's why we were out there so long. They were cross-checked about five times. I got sick so I climbed into a spacesuit and went outside and took some photographs of the Sun which I hoped would help to determine hydrogen density in the outer regions. When I got back everything was ready. We disposed ourselves about the control room and relaxed for all we were worth. We were all praying that this time nothing would go wrong, and all looking forward to seeing Earth again after four months subjective time away, except for Charley, who was still chuckling and shaking his head, and Captain James who was glaring at Charley and obviously wishing human dignity permitted him to tear Charley limb from limb.
Then James pressed the button.

"Everything twanged like a bowstring. I felt myself turned inside out, passed through a small sieve, and poured back into shape. The entire bow wall-screen was full of Earth. Something was wrong all right, and this time it was much, much worse. We'd come out of the jump about two hundred miles above the Pacific, pointed straight down, traveling at a relative speed of about two thousand miles an hour.

"It was a fantastic situation. Here was the Whale, the most powerful ship ever built, which could cover fifty light-years in a subjective time of one second, and it was helpless. For, as of course you know, the star-drive couldn't be used again for at least two hours.

"The Whale also had ion rockets of course, the standard deuterium-fusion thing with direct conversion. As again you know, this is good for interplanetary flight because you can run it continuously and it has extremely high exhaust velocity. But in our situation it was no good because it has rather a low thrust. It would have taken more time than we had to deflect us enough to avoid a smash. We had five minutes to abandon ship.

"James got us all into the Minnow at a dead run. There was no time to take anything at all except the clothes we stood in. The Minnow was meant for short heavy hops to planets or asteroids. In addition to the ion drive it had emergency atomic rockets, using steam for reaction mass. We thanked God for that when Cazamian canceled our downwards velocity with them in a few seconds. We curved away up over China and from about fifty miles high we saw the Whale hit the Pacific. Six hundred tons of mass at well over two thousand miles an hour make an almighty splash. By now you'll have divers down, but I doubt they'll salvage much you can use.

"I wonder why James went down with the ship, as the saying is? Not that it made any difference. It must have broken his heart to know that his lovely ship was getting the chopper. Or did he suspect another human error?

"We didn't have time to think about that, or even to get the radio working. The steam rockets blew up. Poor Cazamian was burnt to a crisp. Only thing that saved me was the spacesuit I was still wearing. I snapped the face plate down because the cabin was filling with fumes. I saw Charley coming out of the toilet--that's how he'd escaped--and I saw him beginning to laugh. Then the port side collapsed and I fell out.

"I saw the launch spinning away, glowing red against a purplish black sky. I tumbled head over heels towards the huge curved shield of earth fifty miles below. I shut my eyes and that's about all I remember. I don't see how any of us could have survived. I think we're all dead.

"I'll have to get up and crack this suit and let some air in. But I can't. I fell fifty miles without a parachute. I'm dead so I can't stand up."

* * * * *

There was silence for a while except for the vicious howl of the wind. Then snow began to shift on the ledge. A man crawled stiffly out and came shakily to his feet. He moved slowly around for some time. After about two hours he returned to the hollow, squatted down and switched on the recorder. The voice began again, considerably wearier.

"Hello there. I'm in the bleakest wilderness I've ever seen. This place makes the moon look cozy. There's a precipice around me every way but one and that's up. So it's up I'll have to go till I find a way to go down. I've been chewing snow to quench my thirst but I could eat a horse. I picked up a short-wave broadcast on my suit but couldn't understand a word. Not English, not French, and there I stick. Listened to it for fifteen minutes just to hear a human voice again. I haven't much hope of reaching anyone with my five milliwatt suit transmitter but I'll keep trying.

"Just before I start the climb there are two things I want to get on tape. The first is how I got here. I've remembered something from my military training, when I did some parachute jumps. Terminal velocity for a human body falling through air is about one hundred twenty m.p.h. Falling fifty miles is no worse than falling five hundred feet. You'd be lucky to live through a five hundred foot fall, true, but I've been lucky. The suit is bulky but light and probably slowed my fall. I hit a sixty mile an hour updraft this side of the mountain, skidded downhill through about half a mile of snow and fetched up in a drift. The suit is bulky but still operational. I'm fine.

"The second thing I want to say is about the Chingsi, and here it is: watch out for them. Those jokers are dangerous. I'm not telling how because I've got a scientific reputation to watch. You'll have to figure it out for yourselves. Here are the clues:

(1) The Chingsi talk and laugh but after all they aren't human. On an alien world a hundred light-years away, why shouldn't alien talents develop? A talent that's so uncertain and rudimentary here that most people don't believe it, might be highly developed out there.

(2) The Whale expedition did fine till it found Chang. Then it hit a seam of bad luck. Real stinking bad luck that went on and on till it looks fishy. We lost the ship, we lost the launch, all but one of us lost our lives. We couldn't even win a game of ping-pong.

"So what is luck, good or bad? Scientifically speaking, future chance events are by definition chance. They can turn out favorable or not. When a preponderance of chance events has occurred unfavorably, you've got bad luck. It's a fancy name for a lot of chance results that didn't go your way. But the gambler defines it differently. For him,
luck refers to the future, and you've got bad luck when future chance events won't go your way. Scientific investigations into this have been inconclusive, but everyone knows that some people are lucky and others aren't. All we've got are hints and glimmers, the fumbling touch of a rudimentary talent. There's the evil eye legend and the Jonah, bad luck bringers. Superstition? Maybe; but ask the insurance companies about accident prones. What's in a name? Call a man unlucky and you're superstitious. Call him accident prone and that's sound business sense. I've said enough.

"All the same, search the space-flight records, talk to the actuaries. When a ship is working perfectly and is operated by a hand-picked crew of highly trained men in perfect condition, how often is it wrecked by a series of silly errors happening one after another in defiance of probability?

"I'll sign off with two thoughts, one depressing and one cheering. A single Chingsi wrecked our ship and our launch. What could a whole planetful of them do?

"On the other hand, a talent that manipulates chance events is bound to be chancy. No matter how highly developed it can't be surefire. The proof is that I've survived to tell the tale."

* * * * *

At twenty below zero and fifty miles an hour the wind ravaged the mountain. Peering through his polarized vizor at the white waste and the snow-filled air howling over it, sliding and stumbling with every step on a slope that got gradually steeper and seemed to go on forever, Matt Hennessy began to inch his way up the north face of Mount Everest.

THE END
and manœuvrability. A sufficient edge in speed, in fact, to give the Outsiders their choice of running or fighting, unless surrounded.

Nevertheless, Earth had prepared for serious trouble, building the mightiest armada of all time. It had been waiting now, that armada, for a long time. Now the showdown was coming.

Scouts twenty billion miles out had detected the approach of a mighty fleet of the Outsiders. Those scouts had never come back, but their radiotronic messages had. And now Earth's armada, all ten thousand ships and half-million fighting spacemen, was out there, outside Pluto's orbit, waiting to intercept and battle to the death.

And an even battle it was going to be, judging by the advance reports of the men of the far picket line who had given their lives to report -- before they had died -- on the size and strength of the alien fleet.

Anybody's battle, with the mastery of the solar system hanging in the balance, on an even chance. A last and only chance, for Earth and all her colonies lay at the utter mercy of the Outsiders if they ran that gauntlet -- Oh yes. Bob Carson remembered now. He remembered that strident bell and his leap for the control panel. His frenzied fumbling as he strapped himself into the seat. The dot in the visiplate that grew larger. The dryness of his mouth.

This, his first taste of battle! Within three seconds or less he'd be victorious, or a charred cinder. One hit completely took care of a lightly armed and armoured one-man craft like a scouter.

Frantically -- as his lips shaped the word 'One' -- he worked at the controls to keep that growing dot centred on the crossed spiderwebs of the visiplate. His hands doing that, while his right foot hovered over the pedal that would fire the bolt. The single bolt of concentrated hell that had to hit -- or else. There wouldn't be time for any second shot.

'Two.' He didn't know he'd said that, either. The dot in the visiplate wasn't a dot now. Only a few thousand miles away, it showed up in the magnification of the plate as though it were only a few hundred yards off. It was a fast little scouter, about the size of his.

An alien ship, all right!

'Thr -- ' His foot touched the bolt-release pedal.

And then the Outsider had swerved suddenly and was off the crosshairs. Carson punched keys frantically, to follow.

For a tenth of a second, it was out of the visiplate entirely, and then as the nose of his scouter swung after it, he saw it again, diving straight towards the ground.

The ground?

It was an optical illusion of some sort. It had to be: that planet -- or whatever it was -- that now covered the visiplate couldn't be there. Couldn't possibly! There wasn't any planet nearer than Neptune three billion miles away -- with Pluto on the opposite side of the distant pinpoint sun.

His detectors! They hadn't shown any object of planetary dimensions, even of asteroid dimensions, and still didn't.

It couldn't be there, that whatever-it-was he was diving into, only a few hundred miles below him.

In his sudden anxiety to keep from crashing, he forgot the Outsider ship. He fired the front breaking rockets, and even as the sudden change of speed slammed him forward against the seat straps, fired full right for an emergency turn. Pushed them down and held them down, knowing that he needed everything the ship had to keep from crashing and that a turn that sudden would black him out for a moment.

It did black him out.

And that was all. Now he was sitting in hot blue sand, stark naked but otherwise unhurt. No sign of his spaceship and -- for that matter -- no sign of space. That curve overhead wasn't a sky, whatever else it was.

He scrambled to his feet.

Gravity seemed a little more than Earth-normal. Not much more.

Flat sand stretching away, a few scrawny bushes in clumps here and there. The bushes were blue, too, but in varying shades, some lighter than the blue of the sand, some darker.

Out from under the nearest bush ran a little thing that was like a lizard, except that it had more than four legs. It was blue, too. Bright blue. It saw him and ran back again under the bush.

He looked up again, trying to decide what was overhead. It wasn't exactly a roof, but it was dome-shaped. It flickered and was hard to look at. But definitely, it curved down to the ground, to the blue sand, all around him.

He wasn't far from being under the centre of the dome. At a guess, it was a hundred yards to the nearest wall, if it was a wall. It was as though a blue hemisphere of something about two hundred and fifty yards in circumference was inverted over the flat expanse of the sand.

And everything blue, except one object. Over near a far curving wall there was a red object. Roughly spherical, it seemed to be about a yard in diameter. Too far for him to see clearly through the flickering blueness.
But, unaccountably, he shuddered. He wiped sweat from his forehead, or tried to, with the back of his hand.

Was this a dream, a nightmare? This heat, this sand, that vague feeling of horror he felt when he looked towards that red thing?

A dream? No, one didn't go to sleep and dream in the midst of a battle in space.

Death? No, never. If there were immortality, it wouldn't be a senseless thing like this, a thing of blue heat and blue sand and a red horror.

Then he heard the voice.

Inside his head he heard it, not with his ears. It came from nowhere or everywhere.

'Through spaces and dimensions wandering,' rang the words in his mind, 'and in this space and this time, I find two peoples about to exterminate one and so weaken the other that it would retrogress and never fulfill its destiny, but decay and return to mindless dust whence it came. And I say this must not happen.'

'Who ... what are you?' Carson didn't say it aloud, but the question formed itself in his brain.

'You would not understand completely. I am -- 'There was a pause as though the voice sought -- in Carson's brain -- for a word that wasn't there, a word he didn't know. 'I am the end of evolution of a race so old the time cannot be expressed in words that have meaning to your mind. A race fused into a single entity, eternal.

'An entity such as your primitive race might become' -- again the groping for a word -- 'time from now. So might the race you call, in your mind, the Outsiders. So I intervene in the battle to come, the battle between fleets so evenly matched that destruction of both races will result. One must survive. One must progress and evolve.'

'One?' thought Carson. 'Mine or

'It is in my power to stop the war, to send the Outsiders back to their galaxy. But they would return, or your race would sooner or later follow them there. Only by remaining in this space and time to intervene constantly could I prevent them from destroying one another, and I cannot remain.

'So I shall intervene now. I shall destroy one fleet completely without loss to the other. One civilization shall thus survive.'

Nightmare. This had to be nightmare, Carson thought. But he knew it wasn't.

It was too mad, too impossible, to be anything but real.

He didn't dare ask the question -- which? But his thoughts asked it for him.

'The stronger shall survive,' said the voice. 'That I cannot and would not change. I merely intervene to make it a complete victory, not' -- groping again -- 'not Pyrrhic victory to a broken race.

'From the outskirts of the not-yet battle I plucked two individuals, you and an Outsider. I see from your mind that, in your early history of nationalisms, battles between champions to decide issues between races were not unknown.

'You and your opponent are here pitted against one another, naked and unarmed, under conditions equally unfamiliar to you both, equally unpleasant to you both. There is no time limit, for here there is no time. The survivor is the champion of his race. That race survives.'

'But -- ' Carson's protest was too inarticulate for expression, but the voice answered it.

'It is fair. The conditions are such that the accident of physical strength will not completely decide the issue. There is a barrier. You will understand. Brain-power and courage will be more important than strength. Most especially courage, which is the will to survive.'

'But while this goes on, the fleets will --'

'No, you are in another space, another time. For as long as you are here, time stands still in the universe you know. I see you wonder whether this place is real. It is, and it is not. As I -- to your limited understanding -- am and am not real. My existence is mental and not physical. You saw me as a planet; it could have been as a dust-mote or a sun.

'But to you this place is now real. What you suffer here will be real. And if you die here, your death will be real. If you die, your failure will be the end of your race. That is enough for you to know.'

And then the voice was gone.

Again he was alone, but not alone. For as Carson looked up, he saw that the red thing, the sphere of horror that he now knew was the Outsider, was rolling towards him.

Rolling.

It seemed to have no legs or arms that he could see, no features. It rolled across the sand with the fluid quickness of a drop of mercury. And before it, in some manner he could not understand, came a wave of nauseating hatred.

Carson looked about him frantically. A stone, lying in the sand a few feet away, was the nearest thing to a weapon. It wasn't large, but it had sharp edges, like a slab of flint. It looked a bit like blue flint.
He picked it up, and crouched to receive the attack. It was coming fast, faster than he could run.

No time to think out how he was going to fight it; how anyway could he plan to battle a creature whose strength, whose characteristics, whose method of fighting he did not know? Rolling so fast, it looked more than ever like a perfect sphere.

Ten yards away. Five. And then it stopped.

Rather, it was stopped. Abruptly the near side of it flattened as though it had run up against an invisible wall. It bounced, actually bounced back.

Then it rolled forward again, but more cautiously. It stopped again, at the same place. It tried again, a few yards to one side.

Then it rolled forward again, but more cautiously. It stopped again, at the same place. It tried again, a few yards to one side.

There was a barrier there of some sort. It clicked, then, in Carson's mind, that thought projected by the Entity who had brought them there:

-- accident of physical strength will not completely decide the issue. There is a barrier.'

A force-field, of course. Not the Netzian Field, known to Earth science, for that glowed and emitted a crackling sound. This one was invisible, silent.

It was a wall that ran from side to side of the inverted hemisphere; Carson didn't have to verify that himself. The Roller was doing that, rolling sideways along the barrier, seeking a break in it that wasn't there.

Carson took half a dozen steps forward, his left hand groping out before him, and touched the barrier. It felt smooth, yielding, like a sheet of rubber rather than like glass, warm to his touch, but no warmer than the sand underfoot. And it was completely invisible, even at close range.

He dropped the stone and put both hands against it, pushing. It seemed to yield, just a trifle, but no farther than that trifle, even when he pushed with all his weight. It felt like a sheet of rubber backed up by steel. Limited resiliency, and then firm strength.

He stood on tiptoe and reached as high as he could and the barrier was still there.

He saw the Roller coming back, having reached one side of the arena. That feeling of nausea hit Carson again, and he stepped back from the barrier as it went by. It didn't stop.

But did the barrier stop at ground-level? Carson knelt down and burrowed in the sand; it was soft, light, easy to dig in. And two feet down the barrier was still there.

The Roller was coming back again. Obviously, it couldn't find a way through at either side.

There must be a way through, Carson thought, or else this duel is meaningless. --

The Roller was back now, and it stopped just across the barrier, only six feet away. It seemed to be studying him although, for the life of him, Carson couldn't find external evidence of sense organs on the thing. Nothing that looked like eyes or ears, or even a mouth. There was though, he observed, a series of grooves, perhaps a dozen of them altogether, and he saw two tentacles push out from two of the grooves and dip into the sand as though testing its consistency. These were about an inch in diameter and perhaps a foot and a half long.

The tentacles were retractable into the grooves and were kept there except when in use. They retracted when the thing rolled and seemed to have nothing to do with its method of locomotion; that, as far as Carson could judge, seemed to be accomplished by some shifting -- just how he couldn't imagine -- of its centre of gravity.

He shuddered as he looked at the thing. It was alien, horribly different from anything on Earth or any of the life forms found on the other solar planets. Instinctively, he knew its mind was as alien as its body.

If it could project that almost tangible wave of hatred, perhaps it could read his mind as well, sufficiently for his purpose.

Deliberately, Carson picked up the rock that had been his only weapon, then tossed it down again in a gesture of relinquishment and raised his empty hands, palms up, before him.

He spoke aloud, knowing that although the words would be meaningless to the creature before him, speaking them would focus his own thoughts more completely upon the message.

'Can we not have peace between us?' he said, his voice strange in the stillness. The Entity who brought us here has told us what must happen if our races fight -- extinction of one and weakening and retrogression of the other. The battle between them, said the Entity, depends upon what we do here. Why cannot we agree to an eternal peace -- your race to its galaxy, we to ours?'

Carson blanked out his mind to receive a reply.

It came, and it staggered him back, physically. He recoiled several steps in sheer horror at the intensity of the lust-to-kill of the red images projected at him. For a moment that seemed eternity he had to struggle against the impact of that hatred, fighting to clear his mind of it and drive out the alien thoughts to which he had given admittance. He wanted to retch.
His mind cleared slowly. He was breathing hard and he felt weaker, but he could think.

He stood studying the Roller. It had been motionless during the mental duel it had so nearly won. Now it rolled a few feet to one side, to the nearest of the blue bushes. Three tentacles whipped out of their grooves and began to investigate the bush.

'O.K.,' Carson said, 'so it's war then.' He managed a grin. 'If I got your answer straight, peace doesn't appeal to you.' And, because he was, after all, a young man and couldn't resist the impulse to be dramatic, he added, 'To the death!'

But his voice, in that utter silence, sounded silly even to himself. It came to him, then, that this was to the death, not only his own death or that of the red spherical thing which he thought of as the Roller, but death to the entire race of one or the other of them: the end of the human race, if he failed.

It made him suddenly very humble and very afraid to think that. With a knowledge that was above even faith, he knew that the Entity who had arranged this duel had told the truth about its intentions and its powers. The future of humanity depended upon him. It was an awful thing to realize. He had to concentrate on the situation at hand.

There had to be some way of getting through the barrier, or of killing through the barrier.

Mentally? He hoped that wasn't all, for the Roller obviously had stronger telepathic powers than the undeveloped ones of the human race. Or did it?

He had been able to drive the thoughts of the Roller out of his own mind; could it drive out his? If its ability to project were stronger, might not its receptivity mechanism be more vulnerable?

He stared at it and endeavoured to concentrate and focus all his thought upon it.

'Die,' he thought. 'You are going to die. You are dying. You are --'

He tried variations on it, and mental pictures. Sweat stood out on his forehead and he found himself trembling with the intensity of the effort. But the Roller went ahead with its investigation of the bush, as utterly unaffected as though Carson had been reciting the multiplication table.

So that was no good.

He felt dizzy from the heat and his strenuous effort at concentration. He sat down on the blue sand and gave his full attention to studying the Roller. By study, perhaps, he could judge its strength and detect its weaknesses, learn things that would be valuable to know when and if they should come to grips.

It was breaking off twigs. Carson watched carefully, trying to judge just how hard it worked to do that. Later, he thought, he could find a similar bush on his own side, break off twigs of equal thickness himself, and gain a comparison of physical strength between his own arms and hands and those tentacles.

The twigs broke off hard; the Roller was having to struggle with each one. Each tentacle, he saw, bifurcated at the tip into two fingers, each tipped by a nail or claw. The claws didn't seem to be particularly long or dangerous, or no more so than his own fingernails, if they were left to grow a bit.

No, on the whole, it didn't look too hard to handle physically. Unless, of course, that bush was made of pretty tough stuff. Carson looked round; within reach was another bush of identically the same type.

He snapped off a twig. It was brittle, easy to break. Of course, the Roller might have been faking deliberately but he didn't think so. On the other hand, where was it vulnerable? How would he go about killing it if he got the chance? He went back to studying it. The outer hide looked pretty tough; he'd need a sharp weapon of some sort. He picked up the piece of rock again. It was about twelve inches long, narrow, and fairly sharp on one end. If it chipped like flint, he could make a serviceable knife out of it.

The Roller was continuing its investigations of the bushes. It rolled again, to the nearest one of another type. A little blue lizard, many-legged like the one Carson had seen on his side of the barrier, darted out from under the bush.

A tentacle of the Roller lashed out and caught it, picked it up. Another tentacle whipped over and began to pull legs off the lizard, as coldly as it had pulled twigs off the bush. The creature struggled frantically and emitted a shrill squealing that was the first sound Carson had heard here, other than the sound of his own voice.

Carson made himself continue to watch; anything he could learn about his opponent might prove valuable, even knowledge of its unnecessary cruelty -- particularly, he thought with sudden emotion, knowledge of its unnecessary cruelty. It would make it a pleasure to kill the thing, if and when the chance came.

With half its legs gone, the lizard stopped squealing and lay limp in the Roller's grasp.

It didn't continue with the rest of the legs. Contemptuously it tossed the dead lizard away from it, in Carson's direction. The lizard arced through the air between them and landed at his feet.

It had come through the barrier! The barrier wasn't there any more! Carson was on his feet in a flash, the knife gripped tightly in his hand, leaping forward. He'd settle this thing here and now! With the barrier gone -- but it wasn't gone. He found that out the hard way, running head on into it and nearly knocking himself silly. He bounced back and fell.
As he sat up, shaking his head to clear it, he saw something coming through the air towards him, and threw himself flat again on the sand, to one side. He got his body out of the way, but there was a sudden sharp pain in the calf of his left leg.

He rolled backwards, ignoring the pain, and scrambled to his feet. It was a rock, he saw now, that had struck him. And the Roller was picking up another, swinging it back gripped between two tentacles, ready to throw again.

It sailed through the air towards him, but he was able to step out of its way. The Roller, apparently, could throw straight, but neither hard nor far. The first rock had struck him only because he had been sitting down and had not seen it coming until it was almost upon him.

Even as he stepped aside from that weak second throw Carson drew back his right arm and let fly with the rock that was still in his hand. If missiles, he thought with elation, can cross the barrier, then two can play at the game of throwing them.

He couldn't miss a three-foot sphere at only four-yard range, and he didn't miss. The rock whizzed straight, and with a speed several times that of the missiles the Roller had thrown. It hit dead centre, but hit flat instead of point first. But it hit with a resounding thump, and obviously hurt. The Roller had been reaching for another rock, but changed its mind and got out of there instead. By the time Carson could pick up and throw another rock, the Roller was forty yards back from the barrier and going strong.

His second throw missed by feet, and his third throw was short. The Roller was out of range of any missile heavy enough to be damaging.

Carson grinned. That round had been his.

He stopped grinning as he bent over to examine the calf of his leg. A jagged edge of the stone had made a cut several inches long. It was bleeding pretty freely, but he didn't think it had gone deep enough to hit an artery. If it stopped bleeding of its own accord, well and good. If not, he was in for trouble.

Finding out one thing, though, took precedence over that cut: the nature of the barrier.

He went forward to it again, this time groping with his hands before him. Holding one hand against it, he tossed a handful of sand at it with the other hand. The sand went right through; his hand didn't.

Organic matter versus inorganic? No, because the dead lizard had gone through it, and a lizard, alive or dead, was certainly organic. Plant life? He broke off a twig and poked it at the barrier. The twig went through, with no resistance, but when his fingers gripping the twig came to the barrier, they were stopped.

He couldn't get through it, nor could the Roller. But rocks and sand and a dead lizard.... How about a live lizard?

He went hunting under bushes until he found one, and caught it. He tossed it against the barrier and it bounced back and scurried away across the blue sand.

That gave him the answer, so far as he could determine it now. The screen was a barrier to living things. Dead or inorganic matter could cross it.

With that off his mind, Carson looked at his injured leg again. The bleeding was lessening, which meant he wouldn't need to worry about-- making a tourniquet. But he should find some water, if any was available, to clean the wound.

Water -- the thought of it made him realize that he was getting awfully thirsty. He'd have to find water, in case this contest turned out to be a protracted one.

Limping slightly now, he started off to make a circuit of his half of the arena. Guiding himself with one hand along the barrier, he walked to his right until he came to the curving sidewall. It was visible, a dull blue-grey at close range, and the surface of it felt just like the central barrier.

He experimented by tossing a handful of sand at it, and the sand reached the wall and disappeared as it went through. The hemispherical shell was a force-field, too, but an opaque one, instead of transparent like the barrier.

He followed it round until he came back to the barrier, and walked back along the barrier to the point from which he'd started.

No sign of water.

--

Worried now, he started a series of zigzags back and forth between the barrier and the wall, covering the intervening space thoroughly.

No water. Blue sand, blue bushes, and intolerable heat. Nothing else.

It must be his imagination, he told himself that he was suffering that much from thirst. How long had he been there? Of course, no time at all, according to his own space-time frame. The Entity had told him time stood still out there, while he was here. But his body processes went on here, just the same. According to his body's reckoning, how long had he been here? Three or four hours, perhaps. Certainly not long enough to be suffering from thirst.

Yet he was suffering from it; his throat was dry and parched. Probably the intense heat was the cause. It was
hot, a hundred and thirty Fahrenheit, at a guess. A dry, still heat without the slightest movement of air.

He was limping rather badly and utterly fagged when he finished the futile exploration of his domain.

He stared across at the motionless Roller and hoped it was as miserable as he was. The Entity had said the conditions here were equally unfamiliar and uncomfortable for both of them. Maybe the Roller came from a planet where two-hundred-degree heat was the norm; maybe it was freezing while he was roasting. Maybe the air was as much too thick for it as it was too thin for him. For the exertion of his explorations had left him panting. The atmosphere here, he realized, was not much thicker than on Mars.

No water. That meant a deadline, for him at any rate. Unless he could find a way to cross that barrier or to kill his enemy from this side of it, thirst would kill him eventually.

It gave him a feeling of desperate urgency, but he made himself sit down a moment to rest, to think.

What was there to do? Nothing, and yet so many things. The several varieties of bushes, for example; they didn't look promising, but he'd have to examine them for possibilities. And his leg -- he'd have to do something about that, even without water to clean it; gather ammunition in the form of rocks; find a rock that would make a good knife.

His leg hurt rather badly now, and he decided that came first. One type of bush had leaves -- or things rather similar to leaves. He pulled off a handful of them and decided, after examination, to take a chance on them. He used them to clean off the sand and dirt and caked blood, then made a pad of fresh leaves and tied it over the wound with tendrils from the same bush.

The tendrils proved unexpectedly tough and strong.

They were slender and pliable, yet he couldn't break them at all, and had to saw them off the bush with the sharp edge of blue flint. Some of the thicker ones were over a foot long, and he filed away in his memory, for future reference, the fact that a bunch of the thick ones, tied together, would make a pretty serviceable rope. Maybe he'd be able to think of a use for rope.

Next, he made himself a knife. The blue flint did chip. From a foot-long splinter of it, he fashioned himself a crude but lethal weapon. And of tendrils from the bush, he made himself a rope-belt through which he could thrust the flint knife, to keep it with him all the time and yet have his hands free.

He went back to studying the bushes. There were three other types. One was leafless, dry, brittle, rather like a dried tumbleweed. Another was of soft, crumbly wood, almost like punk. It looked and felt as though it would make excellent tinder for a fire. The third type was the most nearly woodlike. It had fragile leaves that wilted at the touch, but the stalks, although short, were straight and strong.

It was horribly, unbearably hot.

He limped up to the barrier, felt to make sure that it was still there. It was. He stood watching the Roller for a while; it was keeping a safe distance from the barrier, out of effective stone-throwing range. It was moving around back there, doing something. He couldn't tell what it was doing.

Once it stopped moving, came a little closer, and seemed to concentrate its attention on him. Again Carson had to fight off a wave of nausea. He threw a stone at it; the Roller retreated and went back to whatever it had been doing before.

At least he could make it keep its distance. And, he thought bitterly, a lot of good that did him. Just the same, he spent the next hour or two gathering stones of suitable size for throwing, and making several piles of them near his side of the barrier.

His throat burned now. It was difficult for him to think about anything except water. But he had to think about other things: about getting through that barrier, under or over it, getting at that red sphere and killing it before this place of heat and thirst killed him.

The barrier went to the wall upon either side, but how high, and how far under the sand?

For a moment, Carson's mind was too fuzzy to think out how he could find out either of those things. Idly, sitting there in the hot sand -- and he didn't remember sitting down -- he watched a blue lizard crawl from the shelter of one bush to the shelter of another.

From under the second bush, it looked out at him.

Carson grinned at it, recalling the old story of the desert-colonists on Mars, taken from an older story of Earth - - 'Pretty soon you get so lonesome you find yourself talking to the lizards, and then not so long after that you find the lizards talking back to you...'

He should have been concentrating, of course, on how to kill the Roller, but instead he grinned at the lizard and said, 'Hello, there.'

The lizard took a few steps towards him. 'Hello,' it said.

Carson was stunned for a moment, and then he put back his head and roared with laughter. It didn't hurt his throat to do so, either; he hadn't been that thirsty.
Why not? Why should the Entity who thought up this nightmare of a place not have a sense of humour, along
with the other powers he had? Talking lizards, equipped to talk back in my own language, if I talk to them -- it's a
nice touch.

He grinned at the lizard and said, 'Come on over.' But the lizard turned and ran away, scurrying from bush to
bush until it was out of sight.

He had to get past the barrier. He couldn't get through it, or over it, but was he certain he couldn't get under it?
And come to think of it, didn't one sometimes find water by digging?

Painfully now, Carson limped up to the barrier and started digging, scooping up sand a double handful at a
time. It was slow work because the sand ran in at the edges and the deeper he got the bigger in diameter the hole had
to be. How many hours it took him, he didn't know, but he hit bedrock four feet down: dry bedrock with no sign of
water.

The force-field of the barrier went down clear to the bedrock.

He crawled out of the hole and lay there panting, then raised his head to look across and see what the Roller
was doing.

It was making something out of wood from the bushes, tied together with tendrils, a queerly shaped framework
about four feet high and roughly square. To see it better, Carson climbed on to the mound of sand he had excavated
and stood there staring.

There were two long levers sticking out of the back of it, one with a cup-shaped affair on the end. Seemed to be
some sort of a catapult, Carson thought.

Sure enough, the Roller was lifting a sizable rock into the cup-shape. One of his tentacles moved the other lever
up and down for a while, and then he turned the machine slightly, aiming it, and the lever with the stone flew up and
forward.

The stone curved several yards over Carson's head, so far away that he didn't have to duck, but he judged the
distance it had travelled, and whistled softly. He couldn't throw a rock that weight more than half that distance. And
even retreating to the rear of his domain wouldn't put him out of range of that machine if the Roller pushed it
forward to the barrier.

Another rock whizzed over, not quite so far away this time.

Moving from side to side along the barrier, so the catapult couldn't bracket him, he hurled a dozen rocks at it.
But that wasn't going to be any good, he saw. They had to be light rocks, or he couldn't throw them that far. If they
hit the framework, they bounced off harmlessly. The Roller had no difficulty, at that distance, in moving aside from
those that came near it.

Besides, his arm was tiring badly. He ached all over.

He stumbled to the rear of the arena. Even that wasn't any good; the rocks reached back there, too, only there
were longer intervals between them, as though it took longer to wind up the mechanism, whatever it was, of the
catapult.

Wearily he dragged himself back to the barrier again. Several times he fell and could barely rise to his feet to
go on. He was, he knew, near the limit of his endurance. Yet he didn't dare stop moving now, until and unless he
could put that catapult out of action. If he fell asleep, he'd never wake up.

One of the stones from it gave him the glimmer of an idea. It hit one of the piles of stones he'd gathered near
the barrier to use as ammunition and struck sparks.

Sparks! Fire! Primitive man had made fire by striking sparks, and with some of those dry crumbly bushes as
tinder...

A bush of that type grew near him. He uprooted it, took it over to the pile of stones, then patiently hit one stone
against another until a spark touched the punklike wood of the bush. It went up in flames so fast that it singed his
eyebrows and was burned to an ash within seconds.

But he had the idea now, and within minutes had a little fire going in the lee of the mound of sand he'd made.
The tinder bushes started it, and other bushes which burned more slowly kept it a steady flame.

The tough tendrils didn't burn readily; that made the fire-bombs easy to rig and throw; a bundle of faggots tied
about a small stone to give it weight and a loop of the tendril to swing it by.

He made half a dozen of them before he lighted and threw the first. It went wide, and the Roller started a quick
retreat, pulling the catapult after him. But Carson had the others ready and threw them in rapid succession.
The fourth wedged in the catapult's framework and did the trick. The Roller tried desperately to put out the spreading
blaze by throwing sand, but its clawed tentacles would take only a spoonful at a time and its efforts were ineffectual.
The catapult burned.

The Roller moved safely away from the fire and seemed to concentrate its attention on Carson. Again he felt
that wave of hatred and nausea -- but more weakly; either the Roller itself was weakening or Carson had learned
how to protect himself against the mental attack.

He thumbed his nose at it and then sent it scuttling back to safety with a stone. The Roller went to the back of
its half of the arena and started pulling up bushes again. Probably it was going to make another catapult.

Carson verified that the barrier was still operating, and then found himself sitting in the sand beside it, suddenly
too weak to stand up.

His leg throbbed steadily now and the pangs of thirst were severe. But those things paled beside the physical
exhaustion that gripped his entire body.

Hell must be like this, he thought, the hell that the ancients had believed in. He fought to stay awake, and yet
staying awake seemed futile, for there was nothing he could do while the barrier remained impregnable and the
Roller stayed back out of range.

He tried to remember what he had read in books of archaeology about the methods of fighting used back in the
days before metal and plastic. The stone missile had come first, he thought. Well, that he already had.

Bow and arrow? No; he'd tried archery once and knew his own ineptness even with a modern sportsman's dura-
steel weapon, made for accuracy. With only the crude, pieced-together outfit he could make here, he doubted if he
could shoot as far as he could throw a rock.

Spear? Well, he could make that. It would be useless at any distance, but would be a handy thing at close range,
if he ever got to close range. Making one would help keep his mind from wandering, as it was beginning to do.

He was still beside one of the piles of stones. He sorted through it until he found one shaped roughly like a
spearhead. With a smaller stone he began to chip it into shape, fashioning sharp shoulders on the sides so that if it
penetrated it would not pull out again like a harpoon. A harpoon was better than a spear, maybe, for this crazy
contest. If he could once get it into the Roller, and had a rope on it, he could pull the Roller up against the barrier
and the stone blade of his knife would reach through that barrier, even if his hands wouldn't.

The shaft was harder to make than the head, but by splitting and joining the main stems of four of the bushes,
and wrapping the joints with the tough but thin tendrils, he got a strong shaft about four feet long, and tied the stone
head in a notch cut in one end. It was crude, but strong.

With the tendrils he made himself twenty feet of line. It was light and didn't look strong, but he knew it would
hold his weight and to spare. He tied one end of it to the shaft of the harpoon and the other end about his right wrist.
At least, if he threw his harpoon across the barrier, he'd be able to pull it back if he missed.

He tried to stand up, to see what the Roller was doing, and found he couldn't get to his feet. On the third try, he
got as far as his knees and then fell flat again.

'I've got to sleep,' he thought. 'If a showdown came now, I'd be helpless. He could come up here and kill me, if
he knew. I've got to regain some strength.'

Slowly, painfully, he crawled back from the barrier.

The jar of something thudding against the sand near him wakened him from a confused and horrible dream to a
more confused and horrible reality, and he opened his eyes again to blue radiance over blue sand.

How long had he slept? A minute? A day?

Another stone thudded nearer and threw sand on him. He got his arms under him and sat up. He turned round
and saw the Roller twenty yards away, at the barrier.

It rolled off hastily as he sat up, not stopping until it was as far away as it could get.

He'd fallen asleep too soon, he realized, while he was still in range of the Roller's throwing. Seeing him lying
motionless, it had dared come up to the barrier. Luckily, it didn't realize how weak he was, or it could have stayed
there and kept on throwing stones.

He started crawling again, this time forcing himself to keep going until he was as far as he could go, until the
opaque wall of the arena's outer shell was only a yard away.

Then things slipped away again....

When he awoke, nothing about him was changed, but this time he knew that he had slept a long while. The first
thing he became aware of was the inside of his mouth; it was dry, caked. His tongue was swollen.

Something was wrong, he knew, as he returned slowly to full awareness. He felt less tired, the stage of utter
exhaustion had passed. But there was pain, agonizing pain. It wasn't until he tried to move that he knew that it came
from his leg.

He raised his head and looked down at it. It was swollen below the knee, and the swelling showed even half-
way up his thigh. The plant tendrils he had tied round the protective pad of leaves now cut deeply into his flesh.

To get his knife under that imbedded lashing would have been impossible. Fortunately, the final knot was over
the shin bone where the vine cut in less deeply than elsewhere. He was able, after an effort, to untie the knot.

A look under the pad of leaves showed him the worst: infection and blood poisoning. Without drugs, without
even water, there wasn't a thing he could do about it, except die when the poison spread through his system.
He knew it was hopeless, then, and that he'd lost, and with him, humanity. When he died here, out there in the
universe he knew, all his friends, everybody, would die too. Earth and the colonized planets would become the home
of the red, rolling, alien Outsiders.

It was that thought which gave him courage to start crawling, almost blindly, towards the barrier again, pulling
himself along by his arms and hands.

There was a chance in a million that he'd have strength left when he got there to throw his harpoon-spear just
once, and with deadly effect, if the Roller would come up to the barrier, or if the barrier was gone.

It took him years, it seemed, to get there. The barrier wasn't gone. It was as impassable as when he'd first felt it.
The Roller wasn't at the barrier. By raising himself up on his elbows, he could see it at the back of its part of the
arena, working on a wooden framework that was a half-completed duplicate of the catapult he'd destroyed.

It was moving slowly now. Undoubtedly it had weakened, too.

Carson doubted that it would ever need that second catapult. He'd be dead, he thought, before it was finished.

His mind must have slipped for a moment, for he found himself beating his fists against the barrier in futile
rage, and made himself stop. He closed his eyes, tried to make himself calm.

'Hello,' said a voice.

It was a small, thin voice. He opened his eyes and turned his head. It was a lizard.

'Go away,' Carson wanted to say. 'Go away; you're not really there, or you're there but not really talking. I'm
imagining things again.'

But he couldn't talk; his throat and tongue were past all speech with the dryness. He closed his eyes again.

'Hurt,' said the voice. 'Kill. Hurt -- kill. Come.'

He opened his eyes again. The blue ten-legged lizard was still there. It ran a little way along the barrier, came
back, started off again, and came back.

'Hurt,' it said. 'Kill. Come.'

Again it started off, and came back. Obviously it wanted Carson to follow it along the barrier.

He closed his eyes again. The voice kept on. The same three meaningless words. Each time he opened his eyes,
it ran off and came back.

'Hurt. Kill. Come.'

Carson groaned. Since there would be no peace unless he followed the thing, he crawled after it.

Another sound, a high-pitched, squealing, came to his ears. There was something lying in the sand, writhing,
squealing. Something small, blue, that looked like a lizard.

He saw it was the lizard whose legs the Roller had pulled off, so long ago. It wasn't dead; it had come back to
life and was wriggling and screaming in agony.

'Hurt,' said the other lizard. 'Hurt. Kill. Kill.'

Carson understood. He took the flint knife from his belt and killed the tortured creature. The live lizard scurried
off.

Carson turned back to the barrier. He leaned his hands and head against it and watched the Roller, far back,
working on the new catapult.

'I could get that far,' he thought, 'if I could get through. If I could get through, I might win yet. It looks weak,
too. I might --'

And then there was another reaction of hopelessness, when pain sapped his will and he wished that he were
dead, envying the lizard he'd just killed. It didn't have to live on and suffer.

He was pushing on the barrier with the flat of his hands when he noticed his arms, how thin and scrawny they
were. He must really have been here a long time, for days, to get as thin as that.

For a while he was almost hysterical again, and then came a time of deep calm and thought.

The lizard he had just killed had crossed the barrier, still alive. It had come from the Roller's side; the Roller
had pulled off its legs and then tossed it contemptuously at him and it had come through the barrier.

It hadn't been dead, merely unconscious. A live lizard couldn't go through the barrier, but an unconscious one
could. The barrier was not a barrier, then, to living flesh, but to conscious flesh. It was a mental protection, a mental
hazard.

With that thought, Carson started crawling along the barrier to make his last desperate gamble, a hope so
forlorn that only a dying man would have dared try it.

He moved along the barrier to the mound of sand, about four feet high, which he'd scooped out while trying --
how many days ago? -- to dig under the barrier or to reach water. That mound lay right at the barrier, its farther
slope half on one side of the barrier, half on the other.

Taking with him a rock from the pile nearby, he climbed up to the top of the dune and lay there against the
barrier, so that if the barrier were taken away he'd roll on down the short slope, into the enemy territory.
He checked to be sure that the knife was safely in his rope belt, that the harpoon was in the crook of his left arm and that the twenty-foot rope fastened to it and to his wrist. Then with his right hand he raised the rock with which he would hit himself on the head. Luck would have to be with him on that blow; it would have to be hard enough to knock him out, but not hard enough to knock him out for long.

He had a hunch that the Roller was watching him, and would see him roll down through the barrier, and come to investigate. It would believe he was dead, he hoped -- he thought it had probably drawn the same deduction about the nature of the barrier that he had. But it would come cautiously; he would have a little time -- He struck himself.

Pain brought him back to consciousness, a sudden, sharp pain in his hip that was different from the pain in his head and leg. He had, thinking things out before he had struck himself, anticipated that very pain, even hoped for it, and had steeled himself against awakening with a sudden movement.

He opened his eyes just a slit, and saw that he had guessed rightly. The Roller was coming closer. It was twenty feet away; the pain that had awakened him was the stone it had tossed to see whether he was alive or dead. He lay still. It came closer, fifteen feet away, and stopped again. Carson scarcely breathed.

As nearly as possible, he was keeping his mind a blank, lest its telepathic ability detect consciousness in him. And with his mind blanked out that way, the impact of its thoughts upon his mind was shattering.

He felt sheer horror at the alienness, the di~Jerentness of those thoughts, conveying things that he felt but could not understand or express, because no terrestrial language had words, no terrestrial brain had images to fit them. The mind of a spider, he thought, or the mind of a praying mantis or a Martian sand-serpent, raised to intelligence and put in telepathic rapport with human minds, would be a homely familiar thing, compared to this.

He understood now that the Entity had been right: Man or Roller, the universe was not a place that could hold them both.

Closer. Carson waited until it was only feet away, until its clawed tentacles reached out....

Oblivious to agony now, he sat up, raised and flung the harpoon with all the strength that remained to him. As the Roller, deeply stabbed by the harpoon, rolled away, Carson tried to get to his feet to run after it. He couldn't do that; he fell, but kept crawling.

It reached the end of the rope, and he was jerked forward by the pull on his wrist. It dragged him a few feet and then stopped. Carson kept going, pulling himself towards it hand over hand along the rope. It stopped there, tentacles trying in vain to pull out the harpoon. It seemed to shudder and quiver, and then realized that it couldn't get away, for it rolled back towards him, clawed tentacles reaching out.

Stone knife in hand, he met it. He stabbed, again and again, while those horrid claws ripped skin and flesh and muscle from his body.

He stabbed and slashed, and at last it was still.

A bell was ringing, and it took him a while after he'd opened his eyes to tell where he was and what it was. He was strapped into the seat of his scouter, and the visiplate before him showed only empty space. No Outsider ship and no impossible planet.

The bell was the communications plate signal; someone wanted him to switch power into the receiver. Purely reflex action enabled him to reach forward and throw the lever.

The face of Brander, captain of the Magellan, mother-ship of his group of scouters, flashed into the screen. His face was pale and his black eyes glowing with excitement.

'Magellan to Carson,' he snapped. 'Come on in. The fight's over. We've won!'

The screen went blank; Brander would be signalling the other scouters of his command.

Slowly, Carson set the controls for the return. Slowly, unbelievably, he unstrapped himself from the seat and went back to get a drink at the coldwater tank. For some reason, he was unbelievably thirsty. He drank six glasses.

He leaned there against the wall, trying to think.

Had it happened? He was in good health, sound, uninjured. His thirst had been mental rather than physical; his throat hadn't been dry.

He pulled up his trouser leg and looked at the calf. There was a long white scar there, but a perfectly healed scar; it hadn't been there before. He zipped open the front of his shirt and saw that his chest and abdomen were criss-crossed with tiny, almost unnoticeable, perfectly healed scars.

It had happened!

The scouter, under automatic control, was already entering the hatch of the mother-ship. The grapples pulled it into its individual lock, and a moment later a buzzer indicated that the lock was airfilled. Carson opened the hatch and stepped outside, went through the double door of the lock.

He went right to Brander's office, went in, and saluted.

Brander still looked dazed. 'Hi, Carson,' he said. 'What you missed; what a show!'

'What happened, sir?"
'Don't know, exactly. We fired one salvo, and their whole fleet went up in dust! Whatever it was jumped from ship to ship in a flash, even the ones we hadn't aimed at and that were out of range! The whole fleet disintegrated before our eyes, and we didn't get the paint of a single ship scratched!

'We can't even claim credit for it. Must have been some unstable component in the metal they used, and our sighting shot just set it off. Man, too bad you missed all the excitement!'

Carson managed a sickly ghost of a grin, for it would be days before he'd be over the impact of his experience, but the captain wasn't watching.

'Yes, sir,' he said. Common sense, more than modesty, told him he'd be branded as the worst liar in space if he ever said any more than that. 'Yes, sir, too bad I missed all the excitement....'

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Contents

ATOM BOY
By RAY CUMMINGS

Retired and rusticating Pete McLean, former policeman, sees something new in crime-fighting in a rural setting!

MY NAME'S Pete McLean, and I've been mixed up in a few gunfights in my time as a member of the police force in a big city. But when a fellow gets to be seventy, even though he's still hale and hearty, the idea of taking things easy is pretty attractive.

So I retired and brought my granddaughter Effie along to this quiet little Vermont place. Effie, who is twenty-three, was married at twenty, and after about a year she had to call it quits. After her divorce, she came back to me; so she was in the mood, too, for peace and quiet.

You can rusticate grand up here with the Green Mountains all around. If that's what you want. It came hard for me, at first. You know, the captain of a precinct in a big city gets used to action.

The nearest village is Hewlett Corners, hidden from us behind a hill. There's nothing here but woods, a field, a brook, and an undulating white stretch of highway with our little house beside it. It didn't take me long to discover that farming wasn't in my line. I had to do something, so this being one of the main highways through Rutland, I put in a little gas station. The new cars were all coming in now; there was quite a bit of traffic and I did nicely.

It was a Saturday, about sundown. Hot as blazes. It had been a busy afternoon and I was glad when it began to slacken up a bit. I was seated on a stool in front of the little service room behind the gas pump. The house is about a hundred feet to one side, with a white picket fence and tiny garden between it and the road. Effie was there, getting supper.

A car came around a curve from the direction of Hewlett Corners. It slackened, turned into the driveway and pulled up in front of me. It was a big open car, one of the flashy kind, with a New York tag. The back seat was empty; three young fellows sat in front.

"Hiya, grandpop," the driver said.
"What'll you have?" I asked, getting up.

"Eight gallons. Maybe she'll take ten."

All three of them got out and looked around. There's plenty of their kind in a big city. You know, the slick-haired, wise-guy type, who think they know everything. One of them stood near me at the pump and lighted a cigarette.

"Take it easy," I said. "Watch it."
He grinned, but I didn't.

"Okay, grandpop," he said. He tossed it away.

I gave them eight gallons, checked their oil and tires, and filled the radiator. The driver, a dark-haired, sallow fellow without much chin, handed me a ten-dollar bill. I'd spotted them for the kind that inspires you to give a second look at their money to be sure it isn't phony. This picture of Hamilton looked okay. The slim, smallish driver and one of his companions followed me in to the cash register. This other fellow was a husky lad with a dished-in nose.

Maybe premonitions have some sense to them. Anyway, the big one blocked the doorway and the other stood close beside me. As I opened the register, I had an uneasy feeling that it was too bad there was so much cash in it. I saw the rat-faced fellow dart a look over my shoulder at the stack of tens and a couple of twenties I had. Then another car sounded outside. Maybe nothing would have happened at all; or maybe that car came just in time.
Anyway, the fellow in the doorway moved out. I closed the register, handed over the change, and the rat-faced youth and I went outside.

"Nice place you got here, grandpop," he said. "You do pretty well, eh?"
"Fair enough," I said. "Well, see you again, boys. Have a good trip."

The car that had come up had paused but hadn't turned in. Evidently the people in it had changed their mind, for now they were driving off.

The big, ugly fellow had gotten into the front seat of the open car.
"Come on, George," he called. "Let's get goin'."

But George lingered. "You open late Saturdays?" he wanted to know.
"Sometimes," I said. "Sometimes not."

He nodded and climbed in back of the wheel.
"Come on, Pete," he called.

Pete, the third one, was a blond fellow in a flashy checked suit and sport shirt. He had been standing over by the picket fence gazing at the house. He turned and came to the car.
"What's that you got?" he asked. "A shop?"

Effie had a sign that maple sugar and syrup were for sale. And from a couple of elderly spinsters in Hewlett Corners, she got some candlewick bedspreads on consignment. A few of them were hanging now over the porch railing.

"A shop?" I said. "Well, sort of."

"Girl in there," the checked-suit fellow said as he climbed in beside the others. "Just you two here? Lot of work for you, ain't it, grandpop?"

I skipped it. They started up their motor, and as Effie came out on the verandah, one of them yelled, "Hiya, sister." Then they were gone.

Well, that was that. Hindsight is easy, but I must say that at the time I didn't think much about it.

And the next day Albert Carter came to live with us. Which was quite an event, believe me.

It was a hot Sunday morning, and there wasn't much traffic. Effie was in the kitchen while I loafed on the verandah. A tall, rather thin figure came trudging along the highway from the direction of Little Creek Junction. He was carrying two suitcases, a small, battered leather one and a large, square box-like affair, and he looked dusty, hot and tired.

Seeing me on the porch, he waved a friendly greeting. Then at the gate he hesitated, pushed it open and came up the path.

"Good morning," he said cheerily.

He put his suitcases down and stood between them, fanning his flushed face with his hat and pushing his curly brown hair back from his wet forehead. He wasn't the husky type; he looked rather studious. I guessed he was twenty-eight or thirty. But he was certainly tired and uncomfortable, although you couldn't tell it by the expression on his face. He was smiling as though everything in the world was just right. That smile was contagious. I grinned.

"Hello," I said.

He motioned vaguely toward where the highway curves around the hill.

"I hope there's a town that way," he said. "It's four miles the other way."

"Hewlett Corners," I said. "About a dozen houses, if you call that a town."

He was hitchhiking to Rutland, he told me.

"I thought I was all set," he said. "But the fellow petered out on me." He gestured toward Little Creek Junction.

"I had to desert him--he turned south at the crossroads back there."

Effie had heard our voices and came to the verandah door, where she stood wiping her hands on her apron. My granddaughter is good-looking, if I do say it myself--trim and pretty, with her tousled brown hair framing her oval face. She took one look at this young fellow and he took one look at her. That seemed to be enough. Anyway, after that I wasn't exactly in charge of things.

"Why, hello," he said brightly, with that winning smile.

"Hello," Effie said. She came out beside me and took another look at him. "Won't you come up and rest a while. You look so tired--"

He smiled at me, with a sort of deferential questioning to be sure it was all right with me. You couldn't help liking this fellow.

"Get him a glass of water, Effie," I said. "Or maybe you've got a bottle of pop?"

Well, that's how we met Albert Carter; and the upshot was, I hired him to help me around the place. It promised to work out fine, too.

There wasn't much to tell about himself, aside from the fact that he had no family and was a college graduate.
He'd been wounded in the service, and was hospitalized for quite a while so that now he wasn't too strong. Farming was Greek to him, and he didn't know the first thing about servicing an automobile. After I taught him all I knew, he was as good as me. Better, in one way. That grin of his charmed the customers into wanting all the gas and oil their cars would carry. And by Tuesday he was talking them into buying maple sugar and candlewick spreads.

Effie and I hadn't realized how lonely we were. Having Bert around brought a lot of cheer to the place which we hadn't known we needed. But Bert had one peculiarity that wasn't so good, and we found out about it that first Sunday evening. Our first intimation was a weird smell that drifted down from his attic room. I rushed up and found Bert with test tubes, chemicals and what-not spread all around. There was a little explosion just as I got there.

"Well, great heavens," I said.

"It's okay," he said with a laugh. "I hoped it would do that."

It seems Bert was a nut on chemistry. He'd been a research chemist with the Bureau of Standards in Washington when the war broke. He'd quit it, and enlisted. Now he was trying to land a job with some big chemical company. Meanwhile, he couldn't let the stuff alone. Whenever his work with me was done, up to the attic he'd go. Our house sometimes smelled like a glue factory. Sometimes, at night, strange red, green and pink glows would show on the attic stairs. The electric fuses of the house wiring blew out occasionally. And there were frequent explosions.

Effie thought it was wonderful, so my feeble protests didn't make much impression. But after one big blast, which by luck didn't set the house on fire, I dashed up to Bert.

"Hey, listen," I yelled, "what's the idea? Do you do this for fun?"

"Sure," he said, "Partly. I'm just experimenting, you know. It is fun, and there's always a chance I might fall into something important."

"You're not trying to improve the atom bomb by any chance, are you?"

"No," he laughed. "Nothing like that. Besides, the atom bomb is a problem of physics, not chemistry."

I might have gotten used to Bert's chemistry, if he'd kept it in the attic. But by Wednesday or Thursday of that same week, he began to spread it out. Effie found her teakettle steaming with no fire under it. No water in it either, for that matter, just some fool chemical which was evaporating into a white vapor. And at supper that night he poured me a glass of water which turned a sickly green in my glass. Then he poured one for the delighted Effie. Only hers didn't turn green, it blazed up with fire.

Effie was thrilled. "However did you do that?" she said. "Bert, you're so clever--"

He winked at me. "Magic," he said to Effie. And to me: "Nothing at all but a little sliver of white metallic sodium, which perfectly naturally-- from the chemical point of view, that is--blazes when it gets wet. But don't tell her. I want her to think I'm smart."

"Stop that stuff," I said, "before somebody gets killed around here."

It sure gave you an uneasy feeling being around Bert, who had heaven knows what in his pocket. I began to be afraid to light my pipe for fear snakes would come out of it.

Anyway, Saturday came, just a week after those three crooks had stopped and looked us over. I hadn't thought of them, but now somehow, just at sundown, memory of them popped into my head. Looking back to it, I could see how smoothly they had done everything, as though they had planned it ahead of time. One had moved over toward the house, to watch the road and to make sure nobody came out of the house. One of the others had blocked the little doorway of the service station room. A third had followed me to the cash register. They hadn't pulled anything, but they certainly had the proper setup, smooth as silk.

Then I shrugged away the thoughts. You can't spend your time thinking about what might have happened, but didn't. I got busy with two or three cars arriving at once, and forgot it.

After supper, as darkness came, things slackened. It had been a red-hot day, one of those breathless, oppressive days when you wished for a good snappy thunderstorm to clear things up. Sure enough, in mid-evening, there were distant clouds coming and a bit of wind that made the heat more comfortable. Between cars, I sat on the verandah.

Bert and Effie were in the kitchen, doing the dishes. I could hear them laughing. They were getting along famously. Bert, as it happened, had had an experience about like Effie's. He'd left his young bride and gone to war; and soon after he got back he found that all was not well. It wasn't Bert's style to be violent or dramatic. He just quietly told the lady off and got a divorce.

"Couldn't be helped, I guess," he told Effie and me. "Any way, if at first you don't succeed--get what I mean?"

He flung Effie a glance, not brash because it had his queer sort of shyness mixed up in it. Effie had blushed.

They could have been talking like that now, out in the kitchen. Two cars came, but I didn't bother to call Bert; I handled them myself. After all, even at seventy you can remember when you were young.

At ten o'clock I joined Effie and Bert on the verandah. There hadn't been a car for quite a while.

"Guess we might as well close up," I said.
It had been a good day; a rush since before noon. There was quite a bit of cash in the register.

We waited till eleven. Nothing more doing.

"Okay," I said. "Late enough."

"I'll help you," Bert said.

We turned off the electric sign at the roadside. Effie was with us. With the big sign off, the darkness enveloped us. There was just a glow of light from the hall of the house, slanting out onto the verandah; and a glow from inside the little service station room. It was a black night now; no moon, no stars, just sullen-looking clouds overhead and the feel of rain in the air.

"I'll get the cash," I said. I had a little safe in the house where I kept it at night.

I was just starting for the register, when suddenly there was the sound of a car, the motor of it starting up near at hand. In a few seconds it came around the bend--two yellow headlights and a white searchlight at the side. The searchlight beam caught me, focused on me and clung. It all happened amazingly quickly. I had no time to do anything. With me standing there in the glare, the car came up and stopped with a shuddering grind of brakes, mingled with a man's voice:

"Okay, grandpop, stand still if you don't want to get shot."

Effie was near me, in the glare. She let out a little cry.

"Take it easy!" I murmured. "Stand still!"

I could see vaguely that it was a big open car with four men in it. Three of them leaped out, leaving one behind the wheel.

"Put them lights out," somebody growled.

The car lights went off. But there was still enough light for me to see that two of the men had Effie and me covered with leveled automatics. The men weren't masked, but their faces were just dim white ovals in the darkness.

"Make it fast," the man behind the wheel said softly. He sounded nervous, and his voice seemed familiar.

Then I caught a glimpse of his profile and recognized the rat-faced, weak-chinned fellow who had driven the car a week ago. And I saw that one of the men who had his gun on Effie and me was a big bruiser in a checked suit.

It was the same outfit, only now there were four of them. The new one was in front of me, a squat, thick little man, evidently much older. Then I got the idea. Those three young cubs hadn't been equipped for a holdup last week. But they'd looked the ground over, and now they'd brought their leader back with them. Parked nearby, and when we put the lights out to close up, they jumped us.

Effie and I were standing together with our hands over our heads. Then the third man saw Bert, who was closer to the car. Bert had his hands up, too, perfectly docile. The third bandit pounced on him, shoving a gun into his ribs.

"Make it snappy," the fellow behind the wheel called again. "Make grandpop give you the cash an' let's get out of here."

"Shut up," the squat man growled. "I'm givin' orders." He lined the three of us up. "This won't take a minute," he chuckled.

It didn't. The man in the checked suit and his companion held us, while the squat little man darted in and emptied the cash register. I had a gun in the table drawer there. In a way I was glad I couldn't get to it. One gun against three, especially in the open, only gets you into trouble. Then the bandit found it; he chuckled again and shoved it into his pocket.

In a few seconds, with all my cash stowed away on him, he came darting out again.

"Okay," he said softly. "You boys were right. Fair enough."

"Maybe the girl's got some jewelry on her," the man in the checked suit suggested.

"You let her alone!" Bert growled suddenly. "So help me, if you want to start anything--"

What I could see of Bert's grim, tense face suggested that he might have forgotten their guns and taken a poke at them if they'd come near Effie.

"Easy!" I warned. "Let it ride, Bert."

One of the young crooks laughed. "Grandpop's right. Safety first."

All that grandpop stuff riled me. After all, I'm not senile.

"Listen, you young squirt," I said, "I've had many a one like you sniveling in front of me with the guts scared out of him. Put away that gun and I'll take you on with my fists, man to man."

Maybe I could have done it, too, but I didn't get the chance. They kept us covered as they backed toward their car, turned and jumped into it. Then the headlights flashed on and the car roared away, around the bend in the direction of Hewlett Corners. In a few seconds they were gone.

"Well I'll be darned," I said.

"Where's the nearest police?" Bert asked. "Let's give 'em a ring. Not Hewlett Corners?"

"No, no." Hewlett Corners had nothing. "Call Little Creek Junction."
Captain MacKenzie made the four miles in about six minutes, with two cars and five of his men. "Maybe that open car those fellows have isn't too fast," Bert suggested.

If we could catch them before they got to the White Notch crossroads--that's twenty miles. But from there, they could go anywhere. I got in beside Mac, in the smaller car, with Bert and Effie in the rear. It was beginning to rain, and all I could see was the blur of our headlights on the road.

That little car was speedy. It bucked and jumped like a scared jackrabbit. I never even saw Hewlett Corners, as we went by. But fast as we were, Mac's big car with his armed men, was faster. It drew steadily away from us.

From the darkness of the back seat, Bert murmured, "Good luck for us. Might be."

"Good luck?" I said. "Will be, if Mac doesn't wreck us, driving like this."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Bert said. "Those bandits--"

He didn't get any further than that.

"Listen!" Mac said tensely. "Gunshots! Darned if it isn't!"

It did seem that far ahead of us in the murk there was the sound of two or three shots. Then a silence. Then a couple more. We topped a rise. Down another slope, half a mile ahead of us the bandit car had pulled off to one side of the road, and the tonneau was blazing.

"We got 'em!" Mac murmured.

Mac's big car had pulled up a hundred yards this side of the bandits. The bandits were out on the road, ducking down behind their blazing machine with Mac's men firing at them. As we lurched down the hill, there was another exchange. We could see the stabbing bursts of flame, and see Mac's men darting forward.

It was all over by the time we got there.

"Swell," Mac said, as his men herded the sullen crooks forward in the rain. The older one showed now to be a flat-nosed fellow about forty. I never saw an uglier-looking customer. His right arm was hanging limp where one of Mac's men had winged him. His pockets yielded all my cash, which was very nice. The three younger ones weren't hurt, they were just sullen and scared. I've seen plenty of young crooks like that. Too bad they don't get scared ahead of time.

"Shove 'em into the big car," Mac ordered. "Keep away from that bus of theirs. Its tank could explode any minute."

There was still some fire in the back seat of the big car.

"Now however in the world did they manage to get themselves on fire like that?" Mac murmured.

In the rainy murk I heard Bert chuckle. And when I gazed at him, he winked.

"I'm glad it rained," Bert said.

Those little sticks of white metallic sodium! He'd had some in his pockets, tossed them into the back of the open car when it first dashed up in the darkness, with the bandits tumbling out of it!

Effie and Bert are engaged to be married now. Bert still putters with his chemicals. One explosion, last evening, was so bad, even Bert was surprised. Maybe some time he'll finish us all up by discovering something even nastier than the atomic bomb.

I hope not.
They had almost finished with the loading. Outside stood the Optus, his arms folded, his face sunk in gloom. Captain Franco walked leisurely down the gangplank, grinning.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You're getting paid for all this."

The Optus said nothing. He turned away, collecting his robes. The Captain put his boot on the hem of the robe.

"Just a minute. Don't go off. I'm not finished."

"Oh?" The Optus turned with dignity. "I am going back to the village." He looked toward the animals and birds being driven up the gangplank into the spaceship. "I must organize new hunts."

Franco lit a cigarette. "Why not? You people can go out into the veldt and track it all down again. But when we run out halfway between Mars and Earth—"

The Optus went off, wordless. Franco joined the first mate at the bottom of the gangplank.

"How's it coming?" he said. He looked at his watch. "We got a good bargain here."

The mate glanced at him sourly. "How do you explain that?"

"What's the matter with you? We need it more than they do."

"I'll see you later, Captain." The mate threaded his way up the plank, between the long-legged Martian go-birds, into the ship. Franco watched him disappear. He was just starting up after him, up the plank toward the port, when he saw it.

"My God!" He stood staring, his hands on his hips. Peterson was walking along the path, his face red, leading it by a string.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he said, tugging at the string. Franco walked toward him.

"What is it?"

The wub stood sagging, its great body settling slowly. It was sitting down, its eyes half shut. A few flies buzzed about its flank, and it switched its tail.

It sat. There was silence.

"It's a wub," Peterson said. "I got it from a native for fifty cents. He said it was a very unusual animal. Very respected."

"This?" Franco poked the great sloping side of the wub. "It's a pig! A huge dirty pig!"

"Yes sir, it's a pig. The natives call it a wub."

"A huge pig. It must weigh four hundred pounds." Franco grabbed a tuft of the rough hair. The wub gasped. Its eyes opened, small and moist. Then its great mouth twitched.

A tear rolled down the wub's cheek and splashed on the floor.

"Maybe it's good to eat," Peterson said nervously.

"We'll soon find out," Franco said.

The wub survived the take-off, sound asleep in the hold of the ship. When they were out in space and everything was running smoothly, Captain Franco bade his men fetch the wub upstairs so that he might perceive what manner of beast it was.

The wub grunted and wheezed, squeezing up the passageway.

"Come on," Jones grated, pulling at the rope. The wub twisted, rubbing its skin off on the smooth chrome walls. It burst into the ante-room, tumbling down in a heap. The men leaped up.

"Good Lord," French said. "What is it?"

"Peterson says it's a wub," Jones said. "It belongs to him." He kicked at the wub. The wub stood up unsteadily, panting.

"What's the matter with it?" French came over. "Is it going to be sick?"

They watched. The wub rolled its eyes mournfully. It gazed around at the men.

"I think it's thirsty," Peterson said. He went to get some water. French shook his head.

"No wonder we had so much trouble taking off. I had to reset all my ballast calculations."

Peterson came back with the water. The wub began to lap gratefully, splashing the men. Captain Franco appeared at the door.

"Let's have a look at it." He advanced, squinting critically. "You got this for fifty cents?"
"Yes, sir," Peterson said. "It eats almost anything. I fed it on grain and it liked that. And then potatoes, and mash, and scraps from the table, and milk. It seems to enjoy eating. After it eats it lies down and goes to sleep."

"I see," Captain Franco said. "Now, as to its taste. That's the real question. I doubt if there's much point in fattening it up any more. It seems fat enough to me already. Where's the cook? I want him here. I want to find out —"

The wub stopped lapping and looked up at the Captain.
"Really, Captain," the wub said. "I suggest we talk of other matters."

The room was silent.
"What was that?" Franco said. "Just now."
"The wub, sir," Peterson said. "It spoke."
They all looked at the wub.
"What did it say? What did it say?"
"It suggested we talk about other things."

Franco walked toward the wub. He went all around it, examining it from every side. Then he came back over and stood with the men.
"I wonder if there's a native inside it," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should open it up and have a look."
"Oh, goodness!" the wub cried. "Is that all you people can think of, killing and cutting?"
Franco clenched his fists. "Come out of there! Whoever you are, come out!"

Nothing stirred. The men stood together, their faces blank, staring at the wub. The wub swished its tail. It belched suddenly.
"I beg your pardon," the wub said.
"I don't think there's anyone in there," Jones said in a low voice. They all looked at each other.

The cook came in.
"You wanted me, Captain?" he said. "What's this thing?"
"This is a wub," Franco said. "It's to be eaten. Will you measure it and figure out —"
"I think we should have a talk," the wub said. "I'd like to discuss this with you, Captain, if I might. I can see that you and I do not agree on some basic issues."

The Captain took a long time to answer. The wub waited good-naturedly, licking the water from its jowls.
"Come into my office," the Captain said at last. He turned and walked out of the room. The wub rose and padded after him. The men watched it go out. They heard it climbing the stairs.
"I wonder what the outcome will be," the cook said. "Well, I'll be in the kitchen. Let me know as soon as you hear."
"Sure," Jones said. "Sure."

The wub eased itself down in the corner with a sigh. "You must forgive me," it said. "I'm afraid I'm addicted to various forms of relaxation. When one is as large as I —"

The Captain nodded impatiently. He sat down at his desk and folded his hands.
"All right," he said. "Let's get started. You're a wub? Is that correct?"

The wub shrugged. "I suppose so. That's what they call us, the natives, I mean. We have our own term."
"And you speak English? You've been in contact with Earthmen before?"
"No."
"Then how do you do it?"
"Speak English? Am I speaking English? I'm not conscious of speaking anything in particular. I examined your mind —"
"My mind?"
"I studied the contents, especially the semantic warehouse, as I refer to it—"
"I see," the Captain said. "Telepathy. Of course."

"We are a very old race," the wub said. "Very old and very ponderous. It is difficult for us to move around. You can appreciate that anything so slow and heavy would be at the mercy of more agile forms of life. There was no use in our relying on physical defenses. How could we win? Too heavy to run, too soft to fight, too good-natured to hunt for game —"

"How do you live?"
"Plants. Vegetables. We can eat almost anything. We're very catholic. Tolerant, eclectic, catholic. We live and let live. That's how we've gotten along."

The wub eyed the Captain.
"And that's why I so violently objected to this business about having me boiled. I could see the image in your mind— most of me in the frozen food locker, some of me in the kettle, a bit for your pet cat—"
"So you read minds?" the Captain said. "How interesting. Anything else? I mean, what else can you do along those lines?"

"A few odds and ends," the wub said absently, staring around the room. "A nice apartment you have here, Captain. You keep it quite neat. I respect life-forms that are tidy. Some Martian birds are quite tidy. They throw things out of their nests and sweep them—"

"Indeed." The Captain nodded. "But to get back to the problem—"

"Quite so. You spoke of dining on me. The taste, I am told, is good. A little fatty, but tender. But how can any lasting contact be established between your people and mine if you resort to such barbaric attitudes? Eat me? Rather you should discuss questions with me, philosophy, the arts—"

The Captain stood up. "Philosophy. It might interest you to know that we will be hard put to find something to eat for the next month. An unfortunate spoilage—"

"I know." The wub nodded. "But wouldn't it be more in accord with your principles of democracy if we all drew straws, or something along that line? After all, democracy is to protect the minority from just such infringements. Now, if each of us casts one vote—"

The Captain walked to the door.

"Nuts to you," he said. He opened the door. He opened his mouth.

He stood frozen, his mouth wide, his eyes staring, his fingers still on the knob.

The wub watched him. Presently it padded out of the room, edging past the Captain. It went down the hall, deep in meditation.

The room was quiet.

"So you see," the wub said, "we have a common myth. Your mind contains many familiar myth symbols. Ishtar, Odysseus—"

Peterson sat silently, staring at the floor. He shifted in his chair.

"Go on," he said. "Please go on."

"I find in your Odysseus a figure common to the mythology of most self-conscious races. As I interpret it, Odysseus wanders as an individual, aware of himself as such. This is the idea of separation, of separation from family and country. The process of individuation."

"But Odysseus returns to his home." Peterson looked out the port window, at the stars, endless stars, burning intently in the empty universe. "Finally he goes home."

"As must all creatures. The moment of separation is a temporary period, a brief journey of the soul. It begins, it ends. The wanderer returns to land and race...."

The door opened. The wub stopped, turning its great head.

Captain Franco came into the room, the men behind him. They hesitated at the door.

"Are you all right?" French said.

"Do you mean me?" Peterson said, surprised. "Why me?"

Franco lowered his gun. "Come over here," he said to Peterson. "Get up and come here."

There was silence.

"Go ahead," the wub said. "It doesn't matter."

Peterson stood up. "What for?"

"It's an order."

Peterson walked to the door. French caught his arm.

"What's going on?" Peterson exclaimed. Jones turned to him quickly, his eyes gray with fear.

"You didn't see him—like a statue, standing there, his mouth open. If we hadn't come down, he'd still be there."

"Who? The Captain?" Peterson stared around. "But he's all right now."

They looked at the wub, standing in the middle of the room, its great chest rising and falling.

"Come on," Franco said. "Out of the way."

The men pulled aside toward the door.

"You are quite afraid, aren't you?" the wub said. "Have I done anything to you? I am against the idea of hurting.
All I have done is try to protect myself. Can you expect me to rush eagerly to my death? I am a sensible being like yourselves. I was curious to see your ship, learn about you. I suggested to the native—"

The gun jerked.
"See," Franco said. "I thought so."
The wub settled down, panting. It put its paw out, pulling its tail around it.
"It is very warm," the wub said. "I understand that we are close to the jets. Atomic power. You have done many wonderful things with it—technically. Apparently, your scientific hierarchy is not equipped to solve moral, ethical—"

Franco turned to the men, crowding behind him, wide-eyed, silent.
"I'll do it. You can watch."
French nodded. "Try to hit the brain. It's no good for eating. Don't hit the chest. If the rib cage shatters, we'll have to pick bones out."
"Listen," Peterson said, licking his lips. "Has it done anything? What harm has it done? I'm asking you. And anyhow, it's still mine. You have no right to shoot it. It doesn't belong to you."
Franco raised his gun.
"I'm going out," Jones said, his face white and sick. "I don't want to see it."
"Me, too," French said. The men straggled out, murmuring. Peterson lingered at the door.
"It was talking to me about myths," he said. "It wouldn't hurt anyone."
He went outside.
Franco walked toward the wub. The wub looked up slowly. It swallowed.
"A very foolish thing," it said. "I am sorry that you want to do it. There was a parable that your Saviour related—"

It stopped, staring at the gun.
"Can you look me in the eye and do it?" the wub said. "Can you do that?"
The Captain gazed down. "I can look you in the eye," he said. "Back on the farm we had hogs, dirty razor-back hogs. I can do it."
Staring down at the wub, into the gleaming, moist eyes, he pressed the trigger.
The taste was excellent.
They sat glumly around the table, some of them hardly eating at all. The only one who seemed to be enjoying himself was Captain Franco.
"More?" he said, looking around. "More? And some wine, perhaps."
"Not me," French said. "I think I'll go back to the chart room."
"Me, too." Jones stood up, pushing his chair back. "I'll see you later."
The Captain watched them go. Some of the others excused themselves.
"What do you suppose the matter is?" the Captain said. He turned to Peterson. Peterson sat staring down at his plate, at the potatoes, the green peas, and at the thick slab of tender, warm meat.
He opened his mouth. No sound came.
The Captain put his hand on Peterson's shoulder.
"It is only organic matter, now," he said. "The life essence is gone." He ate, spooning up the gravy with some bread. "I, myself, love to eat. It is one of the greatest things that a living creature can enjoy. Eating, resting, meditation, discussing things."
Peterson nodded. Two more men got up and went out. The Captain drank some water and sighed.
"Well," he said. "I must say that this was a very enjoyable meal. All the reports I had heard were quite true—the taste of wub. Very fine. But I was prevented from enjoying this pleasure in times past."
He dabbed at his lips with his napkin and leaned back in his chair. Peterson stared dejectedly at the table.
The Captain watched him intently. He leaned over.
"Come, come," he said. "Cheer up! Let's discuss things."
He smiled.
"As I was saying before I was interrupted, the role of Odysseus in the myths—"
Peterson jerked up, staring.
"To go on," the Captain said. "Odysseus, as I understand him—"
BLIND SPOT

By BASCOM JONES, JR.

Everyone supported the Martian program--until it struck home!

Johnny Stark, director of the department of Interplanetary Relations for Mars' Settlement One, reread the final paragraph of the note which he had found on his desk, upon returning from lunch earlier in the day.

His eye flicked rapidly over the moistly smeared Martian scrawl, ignoring the bitterness directed at him in the first paragraphs. He was vaguely troubled by the last sentences. But he hadn't been able to pin the feeling down.

... Our civilization predates that of Earth's by millions of years. We are an advanced, peaceful race. Yet, since Earth's first rocket landed here thirteen years ago, we have been looked upon as freaks and contemptuously called 'bug-men' behind our backs! This is our planet. We gave of our far-advanced knowledge and science freely, so that Earth would be a better place. We asked nothing in return, but we were rewarded by having forced upon us foreign ideas of government, religion, and behavior. Our protests have been silenced by an armed-police and punitive system we've never before needed. Someday you will awaken to this injustice. On that day in your life, you have my sympathy and pity!

Stark knew that the Settlement's Investigations Lab could readily determine the identity of the Martian who had written the note. But he hesitated to send it over. Under the New System, such troublemakers were banished to the slave-labor details of the precious-earth mines to the North.

Crumpling the note in sudden decision, Stark dropped it into the office incendiary tube. The morning visi-report had shown that there were more than 17,000 workers at the mines. Only five had been Earthlings. Let the armed-police system find the Martian through their own channels. It wasn't his job.

* * * * *

A glance at the solar clock on the far wall reminded him there was still time for one more interview before the last bell, so he impatiently signaled his secretary to send in the waiting couple.

Ordinarily, he liked his work and time meant little to him. He had jumped from interpreter to director in the ten years since the department had been created. But this day was different.

Stark was to announce his engagement at the Chief's monthly dinner party that evening and time had seemed to drag since his lunch with Carol.

When the door opened, he rose and nodded to the plump, freckle-faced girl who entered. The girl topped five feet by one or two inches, but she was no taller than the Martian man who followed her at the prescribed four feet.

After the girl had seated herself, Stark and the Martian sat down. Stark opened the folder, which his secretary had placed on his desk earlier.

"Your names are Ruth and Ralph Gilraut? And you want permission to move into Housing Perimeter D?" It was merely a formality, since the information was in the folder.

When the girl nodded, Stark placed a small check mark in the space beside her name. Then he turned to the Martian.

The large, single red eye set deep in the Martian's smooth, green forehead above the two brown ones blinked twice before he answered.

He spoke deliberately. "As is required of all Martians under the New System, I have taken the name of one of the early Earthlings to write and pronounce." The large red eye blinked again. "My wife would like to move into Housing Perimeter D. By regulation, I respect her wish."

Stark placed a check mark by the Martian's name. He wiped the smudge of ink off his hand and said, "You both know, of course, that Perimeter D is reserved for couples who have intermarried and are about to have offspring?"

The girl and the Martian nodded, and the girl passed Stark a medical report. Stark looked over the report and then made a notation on a small pink slip.

He said, "This permit certifies that you are eligible to move from Perimeter E to Housing Perimeter D. It also certifies that your husband has no record as a troublemaker." Stark looked at the girl. "You understand that you may visit your friends in Perimeter E, but, by law, they will not be allowed to enter Perimeter D to visit you. And, of course, the new law clearly states that neither of you may visit Earthlings in Housing Perimeter A, B or C."

The girl looked down at her hands. Her voice was almost inaudible. "My husband and I are familiar with the advantages and disadvantages listed under the section pertaining to intermarriage in the new law, Mr. Stark. Thank you."

* * * * *

Stark rose as they left. For a brief moment, he thought he had detected a sense of rebellion in their attitude. But that was not possible.
The new law provided equality for all. And his department had been created to iron out relations between the two races—excepting complaints originated by troublemakers for the purpose of weakening the New System. In such cases, Investigations had stepped in and the Martian or Earthling troublemaker had been sent to the rare-earth mines.

The reddish light filtering in through the quartz and lead wall of his office showed that it was almost time for the last bell.

On the street below, shoppers were streaming out of the stores on their way to the various housing perimeters. Earthlings were climbing into their speedy little jet cars for the short trip to the recently modernized inner perimeters. Martians were waiting for the slower auto buses. The traffic problem had been solved, under the New System, by restricting the use of the Martian-built jet cars to persons living in the inner perimeters.

As Stark watched, a black jet car impatiently hurtled out of the line of traffic, bowled through a crowd of Martians waiting for an auto bus, and skidded to a stop at the curb in front of the building.

A tall girl got out. The red evening glow reflecting from her golden hair, made her breathing globe almost amber. Male Martians and Earthlings alike turned to stare in appreciation as she pushed her way through the crowd to the building's compressor lock. Carol was that kind of girl.

Almost at the exact moment that Carol opened the door into Stark's office, the yellow visi-screen of the vocal box upon Stark's desk flashed on brilliantly and the Chief's booming voice filled the office. The light from the screen picked up the highlights on the furniture and gave a sallow, greenish cast to Stark's features. Carol stepped back into the doorway to stay out of range of the two-way unit.

"Stark!" The automatic tuner on the box corrected to bring the Chief's image in wire-sharp focus.

"Yes, sir?"

"About the dinner tonight. Just checking to make sure you're planning to be there. We want a full turnout. An inspection team has come up from Earth and we have two visiting dignitaries from Venus."

Stark nodded and waited for the Chief to say something else, but the visi-screen blanked out.

Carol said, "That was Dad, wasn't it?"

Stark felt very depressed suddenly. "Haven't you told him yet?"

"No. He's been tied up with those inspectors all afternoon. And you know how Dad is, Johnny. There's a right and a wrong time to tell him things. Right now, he's only interested in hearing about Earth."

"But we're supposed to announce our engagement tonight at the dinner." He shook his head. "We can't go on forever with just a few stolen moments here and there, eating an occasional lunch or third meal together in little out-of-the-way places."

Carol laughed, the youthful swell of her breasts against the soft, spun-glass material of her blouse. "Don't worry so, Johnny! I'm a big girl now. This is my eighteenth birthday. Dad's bark is much worse than his bite. I'll tell him about us on the way home."

She moved closer to him, until he could feel the warmth of her body. He could see the warm, damp indentation where her breathing globe had rested against her shoulders and chest.

She asked teasingly, "What did you get me for my birthday, Johnny? Something real nice?"

"What did you want?" Johnny asked her gently.

And suddenly she wasn't teasing any more. She put her arms around him. "Dad and my brother would say I'm crazy. But all I want, Johnny, is you. Just you! You know that."

Stark had picked out her birthday present, but he wanted it to be a surprise for that night. He said, "I already saw one of your presents. A black jet car!"

"How did you know that?"

"I saw you drive up in it a few minutes ago."

Carol giggled. "Dad gave it to me. Did you see me plow through that crowd waiting for the auto bus?"

"Did your brother send you anything?"

She nodded. "Three new outfits from Earth. They were on the same liner that brought the inspection team to the Settlement this morning. Oh, yes, and the captain of the liner brought me this."

She showed him the tiny pin she wore attached to her collar. The pin itself was a carefully wrought but cruel caricature of an awkward buglike creature. A small ruby set in the center of its face served as its eye.

Stark frowned. "Carol, you shouldn't be wearing that." He reached up and unpinned it. "That's the sort of thing our department is fighting."

"But the captain said it was the latest rage back on Earth. They're even making toys like it. I'm sure they're not designed to ... to poke fun at anyone."

Stark started to say something, but the last bell interrupted him. He said, "If you're going to take your father
home and tell him about us before the dinner, you'd better hurry. I'll come early."

Carol kissed him and said good-by. She left the pin on Stark's desk and was smiling at him as she closed the door.

* * * * *

After waiting until the first rush of workers had gone and the building was quiet, Stark caught the elevator down. The overhead lights in the compressor lock were reflected in the twin rows of breathing globes. The green-tinted ones had to be used by Martians in the building, and the clear ones were used by Earthmen when they were outside in the Martian atmosphere. Stark stopped in at a little open shop down one of the many side streets. The sign said "Closed," but he rang the bell until a little, dried-up Martian appeared.

The storekeeper handed him a small box. Stark opened it to examine the ring--Carol's birthday present. The single, large diamond set in the thin precious-metal band dated back to an all-but-forgotten custom practiced on Earth. Stark thought the engagement ring would please Carol, though.

Standing in the compressor lock at the Chief's home later, Stark rubbed the diamond against the sleeve of his tunic. He fumbled with his breathing globe and then pushed the button that activated the door. The tele-guard beyond the opening door scanned him rapidly. As he stepped forward, a red light above the tele-guard flashed on and the door began to close again.

Stark threw all his strength against the door and squeezed through into the house.

Throughout the house, Stark could hear the alarm bell. A taped voice, activated by the tele-guard, said, "Do not enter! Do not enter!"

He found Carol and the Chief in the library alone. Nearly purple with rage, the Chief drew himself up to his full six feet.

The Chief bellowed, "Stark! Are you crazy?"

The growing feeling of sickness spread through Stark.

"Who do you think you are?" the Chief yelled. "Get back to your office and consider yourself under arrest as a troublemaker. Give you people an inch and you try to walk away with everything. Why, I wouldn't let you touch my daughter if you were the last living being in the Universe!"

Carol didn't look up. She stood through it all, silently, without moving. Stark knew now where his blind spot had been. He turned and left them.

* * * * *

Back at his office, he waited for the police. Stark stared down at his reflection in the polished top of the desk. A yellow, moist film of sweat covered his face. The red eye set in his forehead blinked. But the pain visible just behind the surface of that eye was not over Carol or himself.

The pain was for what he was seeing for the first time ... now.

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Contents

CULLY
By JACK EGAN

By all the laws of nature, he should have been dead. But if he were alive ... then there was something he had to find.

Above him eighty feet of torpid, black water hung like a shroud of Death, and still he heard his ragged breathing. And something else. Cully concentrated on that sound, and the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. Somehow he had to retain a hold on his sanity ... or his soul.

After an hour of careful breathing and exploring of body sensations, Cully realized he could move. He flexed an arm; a mote of gold sand sifted upward in the dark water. It had a pleasant color, in contrast with the ominous shades of the sea. In a few moments, he had struggled to a sitting position, delighting in the curtain of glittering metal grains swirling around him as he moved.

And the other sound. A humming in his mind; a distant burble of tiny voices of other minds. Words swirling in giddy patterns he couldn't understand.

Shortly thereafter, Cully discovered why he still lived, breathed: a suit. A yellow, plastic, water-tight suit, with an orange-on-black shield on the left breast pocket, and a clear bubble-helmet. He felt weight on his back and examined it: two air tanks and their regulator, a radio, and ... the box.
Suit, tanks, regulator; radio, black water, box; sand, sea, stillness.

Cully considered his world. It was small; it was conceivable; it was incomplete.

Where is it?

"Where is what?" He knew he had a voice--a means of communication between others of his kind, using low-frequency heat waves caused by agitation of air molecules. Why couldn't he make it work?

Words. Thousands of them, at his beck and call. What were they? What did they mean? He shifted uncomfortably in the tight yellow suit, searching the near horizon for ...

Where is it?

* * * * *

A vague calling came from beyond the black sea curtain. Objectively, because he could do nothing to stop them, he watched his feet pick up, move forward, put down; pick up, move forward, put down. Funny. He had the feeling, the concept, that this action held meaning. It was supposed to cause some reaction, accomplish an act. He wondered at the regular movement of his legs. One of them hurt. A hurt is a sensation of pain, caused by overloading sensory-units in the body; a hurt is bad, because it indicates something is wrong.

Something certainly was wrong. Something stirred in Cully's mind. He stopped and sat down on the sandy sea bottom, gracefully, like a ballet dancer. He examined his foot. There was a tiny hole in the yellow plastic fabric, and a thin string of red-black was oozing out. Blood. He knew.

He was bleeding. He could do nothing about it. He got up and resumed walking.

Where is it?

* * * * *

"Water, black, s-sand, hurt. Pain. Radio tanks ..."

It didn't sound right. After a few minutes, he was quiet. The manythoughts were calling him. He must go to the manythoughts.

If his foot was bleeding, then something had happened; if something had happened, then his foot was bleeding. "No!"

If something had happened, then maybe other things had happened--before that. But how could something happen in a world of flat gold sand and flaccid sea? Surely there was something wrong. Wrong: the state of being not-right; something had happened that was not-right. Cully stared at the edges of the unmoving curtain before him.

Where is it?

It was a driving, promise-filled concept. No words; just the sense that something wonderful lay just beyond reach. But this voice was different from the manythoughts. It was directing his body; his mind was along for the ride.

The sameness of the sea and sand became unbearable. It was too-right, somehow. Cully felt anger, and kicked up eddies of dust. It changed the sameness a little. He kicked more up, until it swirled around him in a thick gold haze, blotting out the terrible emptiness of the sea.

He felt another weight at his side. He found a holster and gun. He recognized neither. Again he watched objectively as his hand pulled the black object out and handled it. His body was evidently familiar with it, though it was strange to his eyes. His finger slipped automatically into the trigger sheaf. His legs were still working under two drives: the manythoughts' urging, and something else, buried in him. A longing. Up-and-down, back-and-forth.

Where is it?

Anger, frustration flared in him. His hand shot out, gun at ready. He turned around slowly. Through the settling trail of suspended sand, nothing was visible.

* * * * *

Again he was moving. Something made his legs move. He walked on through the shrouds of Death until he felt a taut singing in his nerves. An irrational fear sprang out in him, cascading down his spine, and Cully shuddered. Ahead there was something. Two motives: get there because it (they?) calls; get there because you must.

Where is it?

The mind-voice was excited, demanding. Something was out there, besides the sameness. Cully walked on, trailing gold. The death-curtain parted ...

An undulating garden of blue-and-gold streamers suddenly drifted toward him on an unfelt current. Cully was held, entranced. They flowed before him, their colors dazzling, hypnotic.

Come closer, Earling, the manythoughts spoke inside his head, soothingly.

Here it is! Cully's mind shouted.

Cully's mind was held, hypnotized, but his body moved of its own volition.

He moved again. His mind and the manythoughts' spoke: fulfillment--almost. There was one action left that
must be completed.

Cully's arms moved. They detached the small black box from his pack. He moved on into the midst of the weaving, gold-laced plants. Little spicules licked out from their flexing stalks and jabbed, unsensed, into Cully's body to draw nourishment. From the manythoughts came the sense of complete fulfillment.

From Cully's mind came further orders.

Lie down. It was a collective concept. Lie still. We are friends.

He could not understand. They were speaking words; words were beyond him. His head shook in despair. The voices were implanting an emotion of horror at what his hands were doing, but he had no control over his body. It was as if it were not his.

The black box was now lying in the sand among the streaming plants. Cully's fingers reached out and caressed a small panel. A soundless 'click' ran through the murkiness. The strangely beautiful, gold-laced blue plants began a writhing dance. Their spicules withdrew and jabbed, withdrew and jabbed. A rending, silent scream tore the quiet waters.

NO! they cried. It was a negative command, mixed in with the terrible screaming. Turn it off!

"Stop it, stop it!" Cully tried to say, but there were no words. He tried to cover his ears within the helmet, but the cries went on. Emotions roiled the water: pain, hurt, reproach. Cully sobbed. Something was wrong here; something was killing the plants--the beautiful blue things! The plants were withering, dying. He looked up at them, stupefied, not understanding, tears streaming down his face. What did they want from him? What had he done ...

Where is it?

A different direction materialized; a new concept of desire.

* * * * *

Cully's body turned and crawled away from the wonderful, dying garden, oblivious to the pleadings floating, now weakly, in the torpid water. He scuffed up little motes of golden sand, leaving a low-lying scud along the bottom, back to the little black box in the garden. The plants, the box, all were forgotten by now. Cully crawled on, not knowing why. A rise appeared; surprise caught Cully unaware. A change in the sameness!

Where is it?

Again the voice was insistent. His desire was close ahead; he did not look back at the black churning on the sea bottom. His legs worked, his chest heaved, words swirled in his mind. He topped the rise.

Below him, in the center of a shallow golden bowl, floated a long, shiny cylinder. Even from here he knew it was huge. He knew other things about it: how heavy it was; how it was; that it carried others of his kind. He had been in it before. And they were waiting for him. He lurched on.

"Captain! Here comes Cully!" the midshipman shouted from the airlock. "Look what they've done to him!"

The old man's grey eyes took in the spectacle without visible emotion. He watched the pathetic, bleeding yellow plastic sack crawl up to the ship and look up. His hands reached down and lifted Cully up into the lock.

They took his suit off and stared with loathing at what had once been a man. A white scar zig-zagged across his forehead. The Captain bent close, in range of the dim blue eyes.

"It was a brave thing you did, Cully. The whole system will be grateful. Venus could never be colonized as long as those cannibals were there to eat men, and drive men mad." Cully fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked unseeing into the old man's compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry Cully. We all are. But there was no other way. Prefrontal lobotomy, destruction of your speech center ... it was the only way you could get past the telepaths and destroy them. I'm sorry, Cully. The race of Man shall long honor your name."

Cully smiled at the old man, the words churning in his brain; but he did not understand.

Where is it?

The emptiness was still there.

THE END

Contents

DEAD GIVEAWAY
BY RANDALL GARRETT

Logic's a wonderful thing; by logical analysis, one can determine the necessary reason for the existence of a dead city of a very high order on an utterly useless planet. Obviously a shipping transfer point! Necessarily...

"Mendez?" said the young man in the blue-and-green tartan jacket. "Why, yes ... sure I've heard of it. Why?"
The clerk behind the desk looked again at the information screen. "That's the destination we have on file for Scholar Duckworth, Mr. Turnbull. That was six months ago." He looked up from the screen, waiting to see if Turnbull had any more questions.

Turnbull tapped his teeth with a thumbnail for a couple of seconds, then shrugged slightly. "Any address given for him?"

"Yes, sir. The Hotel Byron, Landing City, Mendez."

Turnbull nodded. "How much is the fare to Mendez?"

The clerk thumbed a button which wiped the information screen clean, then replaced it with another list, which flowed upward for a few seconds, then stopped. "Seven hundred and eighty-five fifty, sir," said the clerk. "Shall I make you out a ticket?"

Turnbull hesitated. "What's the route?"

The clerk touched another control, and again the information on the screen changed. "You'll take the regular shuttle from here to Luna, then take either the Stellar Queen or the Oriona to Sirius VI. From there, you will have to pick up a ship to the Central Worlds--either to Vanderlin or BenAbram--and take a ship from there to Mendez. Not complicated, really. The whole trip won't take you more than three weeks, including stopovers."

"I see," said Turnbull. "I haven't made up my mind yet. I'll let you know."

"Very well, sir. The Stellar Queen leaves on Wednesdays and the Oriona on Saturdays. We'll need three days' notice."

Turnbull thanked the clerk and headed toward the big doors that led out of Long Island Terminal, threading his way through the little clumps of people that milled around inside the big waiting room.

He hadn't learned a hell of a lot, he thought. He'd known that Duckworth had gone to Mendez, and he already had the Hotel Byron address. There was, however, some negative information there. The last address they had was on Mendez, and yet Scholar Duckworth couldn't be found on Mendez. Obviously, he had not filed a change of address there; just as obviously, he had managed to leave the planet without a trace. There was always the possibility that he'd been killed, of course. On a thinly populated world like Mendez, murder could still be committed with little chance of being caught. Even here on Earth, a murderer with the right combination of skill and luck could remain unsuspected.

But who would want to kill Scholar Duckworth?

And why?

Turnbull pushed the thought out of his mind. It was possible that Duckworth was dead, but it was highly unlikely. It was vastly more probable that the old scholar had slipped off for reasons of his own and that something had happened to prevent him from contacting Turnbull.

After all, almost the same thing had happened in reverse a year ago.

Outside the Terminal Building, Turnbull walked over to a hackstand and pressed the signal button on the top of the control column. An empty cab slid out of the traffic pattern and pulled up beside the barrier which separated the vehicular traffic from the pedestrian walkway. The gate in the barrier slid open at the same time the cab door did, and Turnbull stepped inside and sat down. He dialed his own number, dropped in the indicated number of coins, and then relaxed as the cab pulled out and sped down the freeway towards Manhattan.

He'd been back on Earth now for three days, and the problem of Scholar James Duckworth was still bothering him. He hadn't known anything about it until he'd arrived at his apartment after a year's absence.

* * * * *

The apartment door sighed a little as Dave Turnbull broke the electronic seal with the double key. Half the key had been in his possession for a year, jealousy guarded against loss during all the time he had been on Lobon; the other half had been kept by the manager of the Excelsior Apartments.

As the door opened, Turnbull noticed the faint musty odor that told of long-unused and poorly circulated air. The conditioners had been turned down to low power for a year now.

He went inside and allowed the door to close silently behind him. The apartment was just the same--the broad expanse of pale blue rug, the matching furniture, including the long, comfortable couch and the fat overstuffed chair--all just as he'd left them.

He ran a finger experimentally over the top of the table near the door. There was a faint patina of dust covering the glossy surface, but it was very faint, indeed. He grinned to himself. In spite of the excitement of the explorations on Lobon, it was great to be home again.

He went into the small kitchen, slid open the wall panel that concealed the apartment's power controls, and flipped the switch from "maintenance" to "normal." The lights came on, and there was a faint sigh from the air conditioners as they began to move the air at a more normal rate through the rooms.

Then he walked over to the liquor cabinet, opened it, and surveyed the contents. There, in all their glory, sat the...
half dozen bottles of English sherry that he'd been dreaming about for twelve solid months. He took one out and
broke the seal almost reverently. Not that there had been nothing to drink for the men on Lobon: the University had not been so blue-nosed as all
that. But the choice had been limited to bourbon and Scotch. Turnbull, who was not a whisky drinker by choice, had
longed for the mellow smoothness of Bristol Cream Sherry instead of the smokiness of Scotch or the heavy-bodied
strength of the bourbon.

He was just pouring his first glass when the announcer chimed. Frowning, Turnbull walked over to the
viewscreen that was connected to the little eye in the door. It showed the face of--what was his name? Samson?
Sanders. That was it, Sanders, the building superintendent.

Turnbull punched the opener and said: "Come in. I'll be right with you, Mr. Sanders."

Sanders was a round, pleasant-faced, soft-voiced man, a good ten years older than Turnbull himself. He was
standing just inside the door as Turnbull entered the living room; there was a small brief case in his hand. He
extended the other hand as Turnbull approached.

"Welcome home again, Dr. Turnbull," he said warmly. "We've missed you here at the Excelsior."

Turnbull took the hand and smiled as he shook it. "Glad to be back, Mr. Sanders; the place looks good after a
year of roughing it."

The superintendent lifted the brief case. "I brought up the mail that accumulated while you were gone. There's
not much, since we sent cards to each return address, notifying them that you were not available and that your mail
was being held until your return."

He opened the brief case and took out seven standard pneumatic mailing tubes and handed them to Turnbull.

Turnbull glanced at them. Three of them were from various friends of his scattered over Earth; one was from
Standard Recording Company; the remaining three carried the return address of James M. Duckworth, Ph. Sch.,
U.C.L.A., Great Los Angeles, California.

"Thanks, Mr. Sanders," said Turnbull. He was wondering why the man had brought them up so promptly after
his own arrival. Surely, having waited a year, they would have waited until they were called for.

Sanders blinked apologetically. "Uh ... Dr. Turnbull, I wonder if ... if any of those contain money ... checks,
cash, anything like that?"

"I don't know. Why?" Turnbull asked in surprise.

Sanders looked even more apologetic. "Well, there was an attempted robbery here about six months ago.
Someone broke into your mailbox downstairs. There was nothing in it, of course; we've been putting everything into
the vault as it came in. But the police thought it might be someone who knew you were getting money by mail.
None of the other boxes were opened, you see, and--" He let his voice trail off as Turnbull began opening the tubes.

None of them contained anything but correspondence. There was no sign of anything valuable.

"Maybe they picked my box at random," Turnbull said. "They may have been frightened off after opening the
one box."

"That's very likely it," said Sanders. "The police said it seemed to be a rather amateurish job, although whoever
did it certainly succeeded in neutralizing the alarms."

Satisfied, the building superintendent exchanged a few more pleasantries with Turnbull and departed. Turnbull
headed back toward the kitchen, picked up his glass of sherry, and sat down in the breakfast nook to read the letters.

The three from Scholar Duckworth were from a different breed of cat.

The first was postmarked 21 August 2187, three months after Turnbull had left for Lobon. It was neatly
addressed to Dave F. Turnbull, Ph.D.

* * * * *

Dear Dave (it read):

I know I haven't been as consistent in keeping up with my old pupils as I ought to have been. For this, I can
only beat my breast violently and mutter mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. I can't even plead that I was so
immersed in my own work that I hadn't the time to write, because I'm busier right now than I've been for years, and
I've had to make time for this letter.

Of course, in another way, this is strictly a business letter, and it does pertain to my work, so the time isn't as
hard to find as it might be.

But don't think I haven't been watching your work. I've read every one of your articles in the various journals,
and I have copies of all four of your books nestled securely in my library. Columbia should be--and apparently is--proud
to have a man of your ability on its staff. At the rate you've been going, it won't be long before you get an
invitation from the Advanced Study Board to study for your Scholar's degree.

As a matter of fact, I'd like to make you an offer right now to do some original research with me. I may not be a top-flight genius like Metternick or Dahl, but my reputation does carry some weight with the Board. (That, Turnbull thought, was a bit of needless modesty; Duckworth wasn't the showman that Metternick was, or the prolific writer that Dahl was, but he had more intelligence and down-right wisdom than either.) So if you could manage to get a few months leave from Columbia, I'd be honored to have your assistance. (More modesty, thought Turnbull. The honor would be just the other way round.)

The problem, in case you're wondering, has to do with the Centaurus Mystery; I think I've uncovered a new approach that will literally kick the supports right out from under every theory that's been evolved for the existence of that city. Sound interesting?

I'm mailing this early, so it should reach you in the late afternoon mail. If you'll be at home between 1900 and 2000, I'll call you and give you the details. If you've got a pressing appointment, leave details with the operator.

All the best, Jim Duckworth

* * * * *

Turnbull slid the letter back into its tube and picked up the second letter, dated 22 August 2187, one day later.

* * * * *

Dear Dave,

I called last night, and the operator said your phone has been temporarily disconnected. I presume these letters will be forwarded, so please let me know where you are. I'm usually at home between 1800 and 2300, so call me collect within the next three or four days.

All the best, Jim

* * * * *

The third letter was dated 10 November 2187. Turnbull wondered why it had been sent. Obviously, the manager of the Excelsior had sent Duckworth a notice that Dr. Turnbull was off-planet and could not be reached. He must have received the notice on the afternoon of 22 August. That would account for his having sent a second letter before he got the notice. Then why the third letter?

* * * * *

Dear Dave,

I know you won't be reading this letter for six months or so, but at least it will tell you where I am. I guess I wasn't keeping as close tabs on your work as I thought: otherwise I would have known about the expedition to Lobon. You ought to be able to make enough credit on that trip to bring you to the attention of the Board.

And don't feel too bad about missing my first letters or the call. I was off on a wild goose chase that just didn't pan out, so you really didn't miss a devil of a lot.

As a matter of fact, it was rather disappointing to me, so I've decided to take a long-needed sabbatical leave and combine it with a little research on the half-intelligent natives of Mendez. I'll see you in a year or so.

As ever, Jim Duckworth

* * * * *

Well, that was that, Turnbull thought. It galled him a little to think that he'd been offered a chance to do research with Scholar Duckworth and hadn't been able to take it. But if the research hadn't panned out.... He frowned and turned back to the first letter.

A theory that would "literally kick the supports right out from under every theory that's been evolved for the existence of that city," he'd said. Odd. It was unlike Duckworth to be so positive about anything until he could support his own theory without much fear of having it pulled to pieces.

Turnbull poured himself a second glass of sherry, took a sip, and rolled it carefully over his tongue.

The Centaurus Mystery. That's what the explorers had called it back in 2041, nearly a century and a half before, when they'd found the great city on one of the planets of the Alpha Centaurus system. Man's first interstellar trip had taken nearly five years at sublight velocities, and bing!--right off the bat, they'd found something that made interstellar travel worthwhile, even though they'd found no planet in the Alpha Centaurus system that was really habitable for man.

They'd seen it from space--a huge domed city gleaming like a great gem from the center of the huge desert that covered most of the planet. The planet itself was Marslike--flat and arid over most of its surface, with a thin atmosphere high in CO2 and very short on oxygen. The city showed up very well through the cloudless air.

From the very beginning, it had been obvious that whoever or whatever had built that city had not evolved on the planet where it had been built. Nothing more complex than the lichens had ever evolved there, as thousands of drillings into the crust of the planet had shown.

Certainly nothing of near-humanoid construction could ever have come into being on that planet without
leaving some trace of themselves or their genetic forebears except for that single huge city.

How long the city had been there was anyone's guess. A thousand years? A million? There was no way of
telling. It had been sealed tightly, so none of the sand that blew across the planet's surface could get in. It had been
set on a high plateau of rock, far enough above the desert level to keep it from being buried, and the transparent
dome was made of an aluminum oxide glass that was hard enough to resist the slight erosion of its surface that might
have been caused by the gentle, thin winds dashing microscopic particles of sand against its smooth surface.

Inside, the dry air had preserved nearly every artifact, leaving them as they had been when the city was deserted
by its inhabitants at an unknown time in the past.

That’s right--deserted. There were no signs of any remains of living things. They'd all simply packed up and
left, leaving everything behind.

Dating by the radiocarbon method was useless. Some of the carbon compounds in the various artifacts showed
a faint trace of radiocarbon, others showed none. But since the method depends on a knowledge of the amount of
nitrogen in the atmosphere of the planet of origin, the rate of bombardment of that atmosphere by high-velocity
particles, and several other factors, the information on the radioactivity of the specimens meant nothing. There was
also the likelihood that the carbon in the various polymer resins came from oil or coal, and fossil carbon is useless
for radio-dating.

Nor did any of the more modern methods show any greater success.

It had taken Man centuries of careful comparison and cross-checking to read the evolutionary history written in
the depths of his own planet's crust--to try to date the city was impossible. It was like trying to guess the time by
looking at a faceless clock with no hands.

There the city stood--a hundred miles across, ten thousand square miles of complex enigma.

It had given Man his first step into the ever-widening field of Cultural Xenology.

Dave Turnbull finished his sherry, got up from the breakfast nook, and walked into the living room, where his
reference books were shelved. The copy of Kleistmeistenoppolous' "City of Centaurus" hadn't been opened in years,
but he took it down and flipped it open to within three pages of the section he was looking for.

"It is obvious, therefore, that every one of the indicators points in the same direction. The City was not--could
not have been--self-supporting. There is no source of organic material on the planet great enough to support such a
city; therefore, foodstuffs must have been imported. On the other hand, it is necessary to postulate some reason for
establishing a city on an otherwise barren planet and populating it with an estimated six hundred thousand
individuals.

"There can be only one answer: The race that built the City did so for the same reason that human beings built
such megalopolises as New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and London--because it was a focal point for important trade
routes. Only such trade routes could support such a city; only such trade routes give reason for the City's very
existence.

"And when those trade routes changed or were supplanted by others in the course of time, the reason for the
City's existence vanished."

Turnbull closed the book and shoved it back into place. Certainly the theory made sense, and had for a century.

Had Duckworth come across information that would seem to smash that theory?

The planet itself seemed to be perfectly constructed for a gigantic landing field for interstellar ships. It was
almost flat, and if the transhipping between the interstellar vessels had been done by air, there would be no need to
build a hard surface for the field. And there were other indications. Every fact that had come to light in the ensuing
century had been in support of the Greek-German xenologist's theory.

Had Duckworth come up with something new?

If so, why had he decided to discard it and forget his new theory?

If not, why had he formulated the new theory, and on what grounds?

Turnbull lit a cigarette and looked sourly at the smoke that drifted up from its tip. What the devil was eating
him? He'd spent too much time away from Earth, that was the trouble. He'd been too deeply immersed in his study
of Lobon for the past year. Now all he had to do was get a little hint of something connected with cultural xenology,
and his mind went off on dizzy tizzies.

Forget it. Duckworth had thought he was on to something, found out that he wasn't, and discarded the whole
idea. And if someone like Scholar James Duckworth had decided it wasn't worth fooling with, then why was a
common Ph. D. like Turnbull worrying about it? Especially when he had no idea what had started Duckworth off in
the first place.

And his thoughts came back around to that again. If Duckworth had thought enough of the idea to get excited
over it, what had set him off? Even if it had later proved to be a bad lead, Turnbull felt he'd like to know what had
made Duckworth think--even for a short time--that there was some other explanation for the City.
Ah, hell! He’d ask Duckworth some day. There was plenty of time. He went over to the phone, dialed a number, and sat down comfortably in his fat blue overstuffed chair. It buzzed for half a minute, then the telltale lit up, but the screen remained dark.

"Dave!" said a feminine voice. "Are you back? Where on Earth have you been?"
"I haven't," said Turnbull. "How come no vision?"
"I was in the hammam, silly. And what do you mean 'I haven't'? You haven't what?"
"You asked me where on Earth I’d been, and I said I haven't."
"Oh! Lucky man! Gallivanting around the starways while us poor humans have to stay home."
"Yeah, great fun. Now look, Dee, get some clothes on and turn on your pickup. I don't like talking to gray screens."
"Half a sec."

There was a minute's pause, then the screen came on, showing the girl's face. "Now, what do you have on your purported mind?"
"Simple. I've been off Earth for a year, staring at bearded faces and listening to baritone voices. If it isn't too short notice, I'd like to take you to dinner and a show and whatever else suggests itself afterward."
"Done!" she said. "What time?"
"Twenty hundred? At your place?"
"I'll be waiting."

Dave Turnbull cut the circuit, grinning. The Duckworth problem had almost faded from his mind. But it flared back up again when he glanced at the mail tubes on his desk.
"Damn!" he said.

He turned back to the phone, jammed a finger into the dial and spun it angrily. After a moment, the screen came to life with the features of a beautifully smiling but obviously efficient blond girl.

"Interstellar Communications. May I serve you, sir?"
"How long will it take to get a message to Mendez? And what will it cost?"
"One moment, sir." Her right hand moved off-screen, and her eyes shifted to look at a screen that Turnbull couldn't see. "Mendez," she said shortly. "The message will reach there in five hours and thirty-six minutes total transmission time. Allow an hour's delay for getting the message on the tapes for beaming."

"The cost is one seventy-five per symbol. Spaces and punctuation marks are considered symbols. A, an, and, and the are symbols."

Turnbull thought a moment. It was high--damned high. But then a man with a bona fide Ph. D. was not exactly a poor man if he worked at his specialty or taught.
"I'll call you back as soon as I've composed the message," he said.
"Very well, sir."

He cut the circuit, grabbed a pencil and started scribbling. When he'd finished reducing the thing to its bare minimum, he started to dial the number again. Then he scowled and dialed another number.

This time, a mild-faced young man in his middle twenties appeared. "University of California in Los Angeles. Personnel Office. May I serve you?"
"This is Dr. Dave Turnbull, in New York. I understand that Scholar Duckworth is on leave. I'd like his present address."

"The young man looked politely firm. "I'm sorry, doctor; we can not give out that information."
"Oh, yap! Look here; I know where he is; just give me--" He stopped. "Never mind. Let me talk to Thornwald."
Thornwald was easier to deal with, since he knew both Duckworth and Turnbull. Turnbull showed him Duckworth's letter on the screen. "I know he's on Mendez; I just don't want to have to look all over the planet for him."
"I know, Dave. I'm sure it's all right. The address is Landing City, Hotel Byron, Mendez."
"Thanks, Thorn; I'll do you a favor some day."
"Sure. See you."

Turnbull cut off, dialed Interstellar Communications, sent his message, and relaxed. He was ready to make a night of it. He was going to make his first night back on Earth a night to remember. He did.

* * * * *

The next morning, he was feeling almost flighty. He buzzed and flitted around his apartment as though he'd hit a high point on a manic cycle, happily burbling utter nonsense in the form of a perfectly ridiculous popular song.

My dear, the merest touch of you Has opened up my eyes; And if I get too much of you, You really paralyze! Donna, Donna, bella Donna, Clad in crimson bright, Though I'm near you, I don't wanna See the falling shades of night!
Even when the phone chimed in its urgent message, it didn't disturb his frothy mood. But three minutes later he had dropped down to earth with a heavy clunk.

His message to Mendez had not been delivered. There was not now, and never had been a Scholar James Duckworth registered at the Hotel Byron in Landing City. Neither was his name on the incoming passenger lists at the spaceport at Landing City.

He forced himself to forget about it; he had a date with Dee again that night, and he was not going to let something silly like this bother him. But bother him it did. Unlike the night before, the date was an utter fiasco, a complete flop. Dee sensed his mood, misinterpreted it, complained of a headache, and went home early. Turnbull slept badly that night.

Next morning, he had an appointment with one of the executives of U.C.L.I.--University of Columbia in Long Island--and, on the way back he stopped at the spaceport to see what he could find out. But all he got was purely negative information.

On his way back to Manhattan, he sat in the autocab and fumed.

When he reached home, he stalked around the apartment for an hour, smoking half a dozen cigarettes, chain fashion, and polishing off three glasses of Bristol Cream without even tasting it.

Dave Turnbull, like any really top-flight investigator, had developed intuitive thinking to a fine art. Ever since the Lancaster Method had shown the natural laws applying to intuitive reasoning, no scientist worthy of the name failed to apply it consistently in making his investigations. Only when exact measurement became both possible and necessary was there any need to apply logic to a given problem.

A logician adds two and two and gets four; an intuitionist multiplies them and gets the same answer. But a logician, faced with three twos, gets six--an intuitionist gets eight. Intuition will get higher orders of answers from a given set of facts than logic will.

Turnbull applied intuition to the facts he knew and came up with an answer. Then he phoned the New York Public Library, had his phone connected with the stacks, and spent an hour checking for data that would either prove or disprove his theory. He found plenty of the former and none of the latter.

Then he called his superiors at Columbia.

He had to write up his report on the Lobon explorations. Would it be possible for him to take a six-month leave of absence for the purpose?

It would.

The following Saturday, Dr. Dave F. Turnbull was on the interstellar liner Oriona, bound for Sirius.

* * * * *

If ever there was a Gold Mine In The Sky, it was Centaurus City. To the cultural xenologists who worked on its mysterious riches, it seemed to present an almost inexhaustible supply of new data. The former inhabitants had left everything behind, as though it were no longer of any value whatever. No other trace of them had as yet been found anywhere in the known galaxy, but they had left enough material in Centaurus City to satisfy the curiosity of Mankind for years to come, and enough mystery and complexity to whet that curiosity to an even sharper degree.

It's difficult for the average person to grasp just how much information can be packed into a city covering ten thousand square miles with a population density equal to that of Manhattan. How long would it take the hypothetical Man From Mars to investigate New York or London if he had only the City to work with, if he found them just as they stand except that the inhabitants had vanished?

The technological level of the aliens could not be said to be either "above" or "below" that of Man: it could only be said to be "different." It was as if the two cultures complemented each other; the areas of knowledge which the aliens had explored seemed to be those which Mankind had not yet touched, while, at the same time, there appeared to be many levels of common human knowledge which the aliens had never approached.

From the combination of the two, whole new fields of human thought and endeavor had been opened.

No trace of the alien spaceships had been uncovered, but the anti-gravitational devices in their aircraft, plus the basic principles of Man's own near-light-velocity drive had given Man the ultralight drive.

Their knowledge of social organization and function far exceeded that of Man, and the hints taken from the deciphered writings of the aliens had radically changed Man's notions of government. Now humanity could build a Galactic Civilization--a unity that was neither a pure democracy nor an absolute dictatorship, but resulted in optimum governmental control combined with optimum individual freedom. It was e pluribus unum plus. Their technological writings were few, insofar as physics and chemistry were concerned. What there were turned out to be elementary texts rather than advanced studies--which was fortunate, because it had been through these that the cultural xenologists had been able to decipher the language of the aliens, a language that was no more alien to the modern mind than, say, ancient Egyptian or Cretan.

But without any advanced texts, deciphering the workings of the thousands of devices that the aliens had left
behind was a tedious job. The elementary textbooks seemed to deal with the same sort of science that human beings
were used to, but, at some point beyond, the aliens had taken a slightly different course, and, at first, only the very
simplest of their mechanisms could be analyzed. But the investigators learned from the simpler mechanisms, and
found themselves able to take the next step forward to more complex ones. However, it still remained a fact that the
majority of the devices were as incomprehensible to the investigators as would the function of a transistor have been
to James Clerk Maxwell.

In the areas of the social sciences, data was deciphered at a fairly rapid rate; the aliens seemed to have
concentrated all their efforts on that. Psionics, on the other hand, seemed never to have occurred to them, much less
to have been investigated. And yet, there were devices in Centaurus City that bore queer generic resemblances to
common Terrestrial psionic machines. But there was no hint of such things in the alien literature.

And the physical sciences were deciphered only slowly, by a process of cut-and-try and cut-and-try again.
The investigations would take time. There were only a relatively small handful of men working on the
problems that the City posed. Not because there weren't plenty of men who would have sacrificed their time and
efforts to further the work, but because the planet, being hostile to Man, simply would not support very many
investigators. It was not economically feasible to pour more men and material into the project after the point of
diminishing returns had been reached. Theoretically, it would have been possible to re-seal the City's dome and
pump in an atmosphere that human beings could live with, but, aside from every other consideration, it was likely
that such an atmosphere would ruin many of the artifacts within the City.

Besides, the work in the City was heady stuff. Investigation of the City took a particular type of high-level
mind, and that kind of mind did not occur in vast numbers.

It was not, Turnbull thought, his particular dish of tea. The physical sciences were not his realm, and the work
of translating the alien writings could be done on Earth, from 'stat copies, if he'd cared to do that kind of work.

Sirius VI was a busy planet—a planet that was as Earthlike as a planet could be without being Earth itself. It had
a single moon, smaller than Earth's and somewhat nearer to the planet itself. The Orion landed there, and Dave
Turnbull took a shuttle ship to Sirius VI, dropping down at the spaceport near Noiberlin, the capital.

It took less than an hour to find that Scholar Duckworth had gone no farther on his journey to Mendez than
Sirius VI. He hadn't cashed in his ticket; if he had, they'd have known about it on Earth. But he certainly hadn't taken
a ship toward the Central Stars, either.

Turnbull got himself a hotel room and began checking through the Noiberlin city directory. There it was, big as
life and fifteen times as significant. Rawlings Scientific Corporation.

Turnbull decided he might as well tackle them right off the bat; there was nothing to be gained by pussyfooting
around.

He used the phone, and, after browbeating several of the employees and pulling his position on a couple of
executives, he managed to get an appointment with the Assistant Director, Lawrence Drawford. The Director,
Scholar Jason Rawlings, was not on Sirius VI at the time.

The appointment was scheduled for oh nine hundred the following morning, and Turnbull showed up promptly.
He entered through the big main door and walked to the reception desk.

"Yes?" said the girl at the desk.

"How do you do," Turnbull said. "My name is Turnbull; I think I'm expected."

"Just a moment." She checked with the information panel on her desk, then said: "Go right on up, Dr. Turnbull.
Take Number Four Lift Chute to the eighteenth floor and turn left. Dr. Drawford's office is at the end of the hall."

Turnbull followed directions.

Drawford was a heavy-set, florid-faced man with an easy smile and a rather too hearty voice.

"Come in, Dr. Turnbull; it's a pleasure to meet you. What can I do for you?" He waved Turnbull to a chair and
sat down behind his desk.

Turnbull said carefully: "I'd just like to get a little information, Dr. Drawford."

Drawford selected a cigar from the humidor on his desk and offered one to Turnbull. "Cigar? No? Well, if I can
be of any help to you, I'll certainly do the best I can." But there was a puzzled look on his face as he lit his cigar.

"First," said Turnbull, "am I correct in saying that Rawlings Scientific is in charge of the research program at
Centaurus City?"

Drawford exhaled a cloud of blue-gray smoke. "Not precisely. We work as a liaison between the Advanced
Study Board and the Centaurus group, and we supply the equipment that's needed for the work there. We build
instruments to order—that sort of thing. Scholar Rawlings is a member of the Board, of course, which admits of a
somewhat closer liaison than might otherwise be possible.

"But I'd hardly say we were in charge of the research. That's handled entirely by the Group leaders at the City
itself."

Turnbull lit a cigarette. "What happened to Scholar Duckworth?" he said suddenly.

Drawford blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Again Turnbull's intuitive reasoning leaped far ahead of logic; he knew that Drawford was honestly innocent of any knowledge of the whereabouts of Scholar James Duckworth.

"I was under the impression," Turnbull said easily, "that Scholar Duckworth was engaged in some sort of work with Scholar Rawlings."

Drawford smiled and spread his hands. "Well, now, that may be. Dr. Turnbull. If so, then they're engaged in something that's above my level."

"Oh?"

Drawford pursed his lips for a moment, frowning. Then he said: "I must admit that I'm not a good intuitive thinker, Dr. Turnbull. I have not the capacity for it, I suppose. That's why I'm an engineer instead of a basic research man; that's why I'll never get a Scholar's degree." Again he paused before continuing. "For that reason, Scholar Rawlings leaves the logic to me and doesn't burden me with his own business. Nominally, he is the head of the Corporation; actually, we operate in different areas--areas which, naturally, overlap in places, but which are not congruent by any means."

"In other words," said Turnbull, "if Duckworth and Rawlings were working together, you wouldn't be told about it."

"Not unless Scholar Rawlings thought it was necessary to tell me," Drawford said. He put his cigar carefully in the ashdrop. "Of course, if I asked him, I'm sure he'd give me the information, but it's hardly any of my business."

* * * * *

Turnbull nodded and switched his tack. "Scholar Rawlings is off-planet, I believe?"

"That's right. I'm not at liberty to disclose his whereabouts, however," Drawford said.

"I realize that. But I'd like to get a message to him, if possible."

Drawford picked up his cigar again and puffed at it a moment before saying anything. Then, "Dr. Turnbull, please don't think I'm being stuffy, but may I ask the purpose of this inquiry?"

"A fair question," said Turnbull, smiling. "I really shouldn't have come barging in here like this without explaining myself first." He had his lie already formulated in his mind. "I'm engaged in writing up a report on the cultural significance of the artifacts on the planet Lobon--you may have heard something of it?"

"I've heard the name," Drawford admitted. "That's in the Sagittarius Sector somewhere, as I recall."

"That's right. Well, as you know, the theory for the existence of Centaurus City assumes that it was, at one time, the focal point of a complex of trade routes through the galaxy, established by a race that has passed from the galactic scene."

Drawford was nodding slowly, waiting to hear what Turnbull had to say.

"I trust that you'll keep this to yourself, doctor," Turnbull said, extinquishing his cigarette. "But I am of the opinion that the artifacts on Lobon bear a distinct resemblance to those of the City." It was a bald, out-and-out lie, but he knew Drawford would have no way of knowing that it was. "I think that Lobon was actually one of the colonies of that race--one of their food-growing planets. If so, there is certainly a necessity for correlation between the data uncovered on Lobon and those which have been found in the City."

Drawford's face betrayed his excitement. "Why ... why, that's amazing! I can see why you wanted to get in touch with Scholar Rawlings, certainly! Do you really think there's something in this idea?"

"I do," said Turnbull firmly. "Will it be possible for me to send a message to him?"

"Certainly," Drawford said quickly. "I'll see that he gets it as soon as possible. What did you wish to say?"

Turnbull reached into his belt pouch, pulled out a pad and stylus, and began to write.

I have reason to believe that I have solved the connection between the two sources of data concerned in the Centaurus City problem. I would also like to discuss the Duckworth theory with you.

When he had finished, he signed his name at the bottom and handed it to Drawford.

Drawford looked at it, frowned, and looked up at Turnbull questioningly.

"He'll know what I mean," Turnbull said. "Scholar Duckworth had an idea that Lobon was a data source on the problem even before we did our digging there. Frankly, that's why I thought Duckworth might be working with Scholar Rawlings."

Drawford's face cleared. "Very well. I'll put this on the company transmitters immediately, Dr. Turnbull. And--don't worry, I won't say anything about this to anyone until Scholar Rawlings or you, yourself, give me the go-ahead."

"I'd certainly appreciate that," Turnbull said, rising from his seat. "I'll leave you to your work now, Dr. Drawford. I can be reached at the Mayfair Hotel."
The two men shook hands, and Turnbull left quickly.

Turnbull felt intuitively that he knew where Rawlings was. On the Centaurus planet--the planet of the City. But where was Duckworth? Reason said that he, too, was at the City, but under what circumstances? Was he a prisoner? Had he been killed outright?

Surely not. That didn't jibe with his leaving Earth the way he had. If someone had wanted him killed, they'd have done it on Earth; they wouldn't have left a trail to Sirius IV that anyone who was interested could have followed.

On the other hand, how could they account for Duckworth's disappearance, since the trail was so broad? If the police--

No. He was wrong. The trouble with intuitive thinking is that it tends to leave out whole sections of what, to a logical thinker, are pieces of absolutely necessary data.

Duckworth actually had no connection with Rawlings--no logical connection. The only thing the police would have to work with was the fact that Scholar Duckworth had started on a trip to Mendez and never made it any farther than Sirius IV. There, he had vanished. Why? How could they prove anything?

On the other hand, Turnbull was safe. The letters from Duckworth, plus his visit to Drawford, plus his acknowledged destination of Sirius IV, would be enough to connect up both cases if Turnbull vanished. Rawlings should know he couldn't afford to do anything to Turnbull.

Dave Turnbull felt perfectly safe.

He was in his hotel room at the Mayfair when the announcer chimed, five hours later. He glanced up from his book to look at the screen. It showed a young man in an ordinary business jumper, looking rather boredly at the screen.

"What is it?" Turnbull asked.

"Message for Dr. Turnbull from Rawlings Scientific Corporation," said the young man, in a voice that sounded even more bored than his face looked.

Turnbull sighed and got up to open the door. When it sectioned, he had only a fraction of a second to see what the message was.

It was a stun gun in the hand of the young man.

It went off, and Turnbull's mind spiraled into blankness before he could react.

"How do you feel, son?"

Turnbull looked at the face. It was that of a fairly old man who still retained the vitality of youth. It was lined, but still firm.

It took him a moment to recognize the face--then he recalled stereotypes he'd seen.

It was Scholar Jason Rawlings.

The scholar smiled. "Sorry we had to strap you down," he said, "but I'm not nearly as strong as you are, and I didn't have any desire to be jumped before I got a chance to talk to you."

Turnbull relaxed. There was no immediate danger here.

"Know where you are?" Rawlings asked.

"Centaurus City," Turnbull said calmly. "It's a three-day trip, so obviously you couldn't have made it in the five hours after I sent you the message. You had me kidnapped and brought here."

The old man frowned slightly. "I suppose, technically, it was kidnapping, but we had to get you out of circulation before you said anything that might ... ah ... give the whole show away."

"Are you afraid that the police will trace this to you?"

"Oh, I'm sure they would eventually," said Rawlings, "but you'll be free to make any explanations long before that time."

"I see," Turnbull said flatly. "Mind operation. Is that what you did to Scholar Duckworth?"

The expression on Scholar Rawlings's face was so utterly different from what Turnbull had expected that he found himself suddenly correcting his thinking in a kaleidoscopic readjustment of his mind.

"What did you think you were on to, Dr. Turnbull?" the old man asked slowly.

Turnbull started to answer, but, at that moment the door opened.

The round, pleasant-faced gentleman who came in needed no introduction to Turnbull.

Scholar Duckworth said: "Hello, Dave. Sorry I wasn't here when you woke up, but I got--" He stopped. "What's
"I'm just cursing myself for being a fool," Turnbull said sheepishly. "I was using your disappearance as a datum in a problem that didn't require it."

Scholar Rawlings laughed abruptly. "Then you thought--"

Duckworth chuckled and raised a hand to interrupt Rawlings. "Just a moment, Jason; let him logic it out to us."

"First take these straps off," said Turnbull. "I'm stiff enough as it is, after being out cold for three days."

Rawlings touched a button on the wall, and the restraining straps vanished. Turnbull sat up creakily, rubbing his arms.

"Well?" said Duckworth.

Turnbull looked up at the older man. "It was those first two letters of yours that started me off."

"I was afraid of that," Duckworth said wryly. "I ... ah ... tried to get them back before I left Earth, but, failing that, I sent you a letter to try to throw you off the track."

"Did you think it would?" Turnbull asked.

"I wasn't sure," Duckworth admitted. "I decided that if you had what it takes to see through it, you'd deserve to know the truth."

"I think I know it already."

"I dare say you do," Duckworth admitted. "But tell us first why you jumped to the wrong conclusion."

Turnbull nodded. "As I said, your letters got me worrying. I knew you must be on to something or you wouldn't have been so positive. So I started checking on all the data about the City--especially that which had come in just previous to the time you sent the letters."

"I found that several new artifacts had been discovered in Sector Nine of the City--in the part they call the Bank Buildings. That struck a chord in my memory, so I looked back over the previous records. That Sector was supposed to have been cleaned out nearly ninety years ago."

"The error I made was in thinking that you had been forcibly abducted somehow--that you had been forced to write that third letter. It certainly looked like it, since I couldn't see any reason for you to hide anything from me."

"I didn't think you'd be in on anything as underhanded as this looked, so I assumed that you were acting against your will."

Scholar Rawlings smiled. "But you thought I was capable of underhanded tactics? That's not very flattering, young man."

Turnbull grinned. "I thought you were capable of kidnapping a man. Was I wrong?"

Rawlings laughed heartily. "Touche. Go on."

"Since artifacts had been found in a part of the City from which they had previously been removed, I thought that Jim, here, had found a ... well, a cover-up. It looked as though some of the alien machines were being moved around in order to conceal the fact that someone was keeping something hidden. Like, for instance, a new weapon, or a device that would give a man more power than he should rightfully have."

"Such as?" Duckworth asked.

"Such as invisibility, or a cheap method of transmutation, or even a new and faster space drive. I wasn't sure, but it certainly looked like it might be something of that sort."

Rawlings nodded thoughtfully. "A very good intuition, considering the fact that you had a bit of erroneous data."

"Exactly. I thought that Rawlings Scientific Corporation--or else you, personally--were concealing something from the rest of us and from the Advisory Board. I thought that Scholar Duckworth had found out about it and that he'd been kidnapped to hush him up. It certainly looked that way."

"I must admit it did, at that," Duckworth said. "But tell me--how does it look now?"

Turnbull frowned. "The picture's all switched around now. You came here for a purpose--to check up on your own data. Tell me, is everything here on the level?"

Duckworth paused before he answered. "Everything human," he said slowly.

"That's what I thought," said Turnbull. "If the human factor is eliminated--at least partially--from the data, the intuition comes through quite clearly. We're being fed information."

Duckworth nodded silently.

Rawlings said: "That's it. Someone or something is adding new material to the City. It's like some sort of cosmic bird-feeding station that has to be refilled every so often."

Turnbull looked down at his big hands. "It never was a trade route focus," he said. "It isn't even a city, in our sense of the term, no more than a birdhouse is a nest." He looked up. "That city was built for only one purpose--to give human beings certain data. And it's evidently data that we need in a hurry, for our own good."
"How so?" Rawlings asked, a look of faint surprise on his face.

"Same analogy. Why does anyone feed birds? Two reasons--either to study and watch them, or to be kind to them. You feed birds in the winter because they might die if they didn't get enough food."

"Maybe we're being studied and watched, then," said Duckworth, probingly.

"Possibly. But we won't know for a long time--if ever."

Duckworth grinned. "Right. I've seen this City. I've looked it over carefully in the past few months. Whatever entities built it are so far ahead of us that we can't even imagine what it will take to find out anything about them. We are as incapable of understanding them as a bird is incapable of understanding us."

"Who knows about this?" Turnbull asked suddenly.

"The entire Advanced Study Board at least," said Rawlings. "We don't know how many others. But so far as we know everyone who has been able to recognize what is really going on at the City has also been able to realize that it is something that the human race en masse is not yet ready to accept."

"What about the technicians who are actually working there?" asked Turnbull.

Rawlings smiled. "The artifacts are very carefully replaced. The technicians--again, as far as we know--have accepted the evidence of their eyes."

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Turnbull looked a little dissatisfied. "Look, there are plenty of people in the galaxy who would literally hate the idea that there is anything in the universe superior to Man. Can you imagine the storm of reaction that would hit if this got out? Whole groups would refuse to have anything to do with anything connected with the City. The Government would collapse, since the whole theory of our present government comes from City data. And the whole work of teaching intuitive reasoning would be dropped like a hot potato by just those very people who need to learn to use it."

"And it seems to me that some precautions--" He stopped, then grinned rather sheepishly. "Oh," he said, "I see."

Rawlings grinned back. "There's never any need to distort the truth. Anyone who is psychologically incapable of allowing the existence of beings more powerful than Man is also psychologically incapable of piecing together the clues which would indicate the existence of such beings."

Scholar Duckworth said: "It takes a great deal of humility--a real feeling of honest humility--to admit that one is actually inferior to someone--or something--else. Most people don't have it--they rebel because they can't admit their inferiority."

"Like the examples of the North American Amerindian tribes," Turnbull said. "They hadn't reached the state of civilization that the Aztecs or Incas had. They were incapable of allowing themselves to be beaten and enslaved--they refused to allow themselves to learn. They fought the white man to the last ditch--and look where they ended up."

"Precisely," said Duckworth. "While the Mexicans and Peruvians today are a functioning part of civilization--because they could and did learn.

"I'd just as soon the human race didn't go the way of the Amerindians," Turnbull said.

"I have a hunch it won't," Scholar Rawlings said. "The builders of the City, whoever they are, are edging us very carefully into the next level of civilization--whatever it may be. At that level, perhaps we'll be able to accept their teaching more directly."

Duckworth chuckled. "Before we can become gentlemen, we have to realize that we are not gentlemen."

Turnbull recognized the allusion. There is an old truism to the effect that a barbarian can never learn what a gentleman is because a barbarian cannot recognize that he isn't a gentleman. As soon as he recognizes that fact, he ceases to be a barbarian. He is not automatically a gentleman, but at least he has become capable of learning how to be one.

"The City itself," said Rawlings, "acts as a pretty efficient screening device for separating the humble from the merely servile. The servile man resents his position so much that he will fight anything which tries to force recognition of his position on him. The servile slave is convinced that he is equal to or superior to his masters, and that he is being held down by brute force. So he opposes them with brute force and is eventually destroyed."

Turnbull blinked. "A screening device?" Then, like a burst of sunlight, the full intuition came over him.

Duckworth's round face was positively beaming. "You're the first one ever to do it," he said. "In order to become a member of the Advanced Study Board, a scholar must solve that much of the City's secret by himself. I'm a much older man than you, and I just solved it in the past few months."

"You will be the first Ph.D. to be admitted to the Board while you're working on your scholar's degree. Congratulations."

Turnbull looked down at his big hands, a pleased look on his face. Then he looked up at Scholar Duckworth. "Got a cigarette, Jim? Thanks. You know, we've still got plenty of work ahead of us, trying to find out just what it is
that the City builders want us to learn."

Duckworth smiled as he held a flame to the tip of Turnbull's cigarette.

"Who knows?" he said quietly. "Hell, maybe they want us to learn about them!"

Dane Phillips slouched in the window seat, watching the morning crowds on their way to work and carefully avoiding any attempt to read Jordan's old face as the editor skimmed through the notes. He had learned to make his tall, bony body seem all loose-jointed relaxation, no matter what he felt. But the oversized hands in his pockets were clenched so tightly that the nails were cutting into his palms.

Every tick of the old-fashioned clock sent a throb racing through his brain. Every rustle of the pages seemed to release a fresh shot of adrenalin into his blood stream. This time, his mind was pleading. It has to be right this time....

Jordan finished his reading and shoved the folder back. He reached for his pipe, sighed, and then nodded slowly. "A nice job of researching, Phillips. And it might make a good feature for the Sunday section, at that."

It took a second to realize that the words meant acceptance, for Phillips had prepared himself too thoroughly against another failure. Now he felt the tautened muscles release, so quickly that he would have fallen if he hadn't been braced against the seat.

He groped in his mind, hunting for words, and finding none. There was only the hot, sudden flame of unbelieving hope. And then an almost blinding exultation.

* * * * *

Jordan didn't seem to notice his silence. The editor made a neat pile of the notes, nodding again. "Sure. I like it. We've been short of shock stuff lately and the readers go for it when we can get a fresh angle. But naturally you'd have to leave out all that nonsense on Blanding. Hell, the man's just buried, and his relatives and friends--"

"But that's the proof!" Phillips stared at the editor, trying to penetrate through the haze of hope that had somehow grown chilled and unreal. His thoughts were abruptly disorganized and out of his control. Only the urgency remained. "It's the key evidence. And we've got to move fast! I don't know how long it takes, but even one more day may be too late!"

Jordan nearly dropped the pipe from his lips as he jerked upright to peer sharply at the younger man. "Are you crazy? Do you seriously expect me to get an order to exhume him now? What would it get us, other than lawsuits? Even if we could get the order without cause--which we can't!"

Then the pipe did fall as he gaped open-mouthed. "My God, you believe all that stuff. You expected us to publish it straight!"

"No," Dane said thickly. The hope was gone now, as if it had never existed, leaving a numb emptiness where nothing mattered. "No, I guess I didn't really expect anything. But I believe the facts. Why shouldn't I?"

He reached for the papers with hands he could hardly control and began stuffing them back into the folder. All the careful documentation, the fingerprints--smudged, perhaps, in some cases, but still evidence enough for anyone but a fool--

"Phillips?" Jordan said questioningly to himself, and then his voice was taking on a new edge. "Phillips! Wait a minute, I've got it now! Dane Phillips, not Arthur! Two years on the Trib. Then you turned up on the Register in Seattle? Phillip Dean, or some such name there."

"Yeah," Dane agreed. There was no use in denying anything now. "Yeah, Dane Arthur Phillips. So I suppose I'm through here?"

Jordan nodded again and there was a faint look of fear in his expression. "You can pick up your pay on the way out. And make it quick, before I change my mind and call the boys in white!"

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It could have been worse. It had been worse before. And there was enough in the pay envelope to buy what he needed--a flash camera, a little folding shovel from one of the surplus houses, and a bottle of good scotch. It would
be dark enough for him to taxi out to Oakhaven Cemetery, where Blanding had been buried.

It wouldn't change the minds of the fools, of course. Even if he could drag back what he might find, without the change being completed, they wouldn't accept the evidence. He'd been crazy to think anything could change their minds. And they called him a fanatic! If the facts he'd dug up in ten years of hunting wouldn't convince them, nothing would. And yet he had to see for himself, before it was too late!

He picked a cheap hotel at random and checked in under an assumed name. He couldn't go back to his room while there was a chance that Jordan still might try to turn him in. There wouldn't be time for Sylvia's detectives to bother him, probably, but there was the ever-present danger that one of the aliens might intercept the message.

He shivered. He'd been risking that for ten years, yet the likelihood was still a horror to him. The uncertainty made it harder to take than any human-devised torture could be. There was no way of guessing what an alien might do to anyone who discovered that all men were not human— that some were ... zombies.

There was the classic syllogism: All men are mortal; I am a man; therefore, I am mortal. But not Blanding—or Corporal Harding.

It was Harding's "death" that had started it all during the fighting on Guadalcanal. A grenade had come flying into the foxhole where Dane and Harding had felt reasonably safe. The concussion had knocked Dane out, possibly saving his life when the enemy thought he was dead. He'd come to in the daylight to see Harding lying there, mangled and twisted, with his throat torn. There was blood on Dane's uniform, obviously spattered from the dead man. It hadn't been a mistake or delusion; Harding had been dead.

It had taken Dane two days of crawling and hiding to get back to his group, too exhausted to report Harding's death. And when he awoke, Harding had been standing beside him, with a whole throat and a fresh uniform, grinning and kidding him for running off and leaving a stunned friend behind.

It was no ringer, but Harding himself, complete to the smallest personal memories and personality traits.

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The pressures of war probably saved Dane's sanity while he learned to face the facts. All men are mortal; Harding is not mortal; therefore, Harding is not a man! Nor was Harding alone—Dane found enough evidence to know there were others.

The Tribune morgue yielded even more data. A man had faced seven firing squads and walked away. Another survived over a dozen attacks by professional killers. Fingerprints turned up mysteriously "copied" from those of men long dead. Some of the aliens seemed to heal almost instantly; others took days. Some operated completely alone; some seemed to have joined with others. But they were legion.

Lack of a clearer pattern of attack made him consider the possibility of human mutation, but such tissue was too wildly different, and the invasion had begun long before atomics or X-rays. He gave up trying to understand their alien motivations. It was enough that they existed in secret, slowly growing in numbers while mankind was unaware of them.

When his proof was complete and irrefutable, he took it to his editor— to be fired, politely but coldly. Other editors were less polite. But he went on doggedly trying and failing. What else could he do? Somehow, he had to find the few people who could recognize facts and warn them. The aliens would get him, of course, when the story broke, but a warned humanity could cope with them. Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Then he met Sylvia by accident after losing his fifth job—a girl who had inherited a fortune big enough to spread his message in paid ads across the country. They were married before he found she was hard-headed about her money. She demanded a full explanation for every cent beyond his allowance. In the end, she got the explanation. And while he was trying to cash the check she gave him, she visited Dr. Buehl, to come back with a squad of quiet, refined strong-arm boys who made sure Dane reached Buehl's "rest home" safely.

Hydrotherapy ... Buehl as the kindly firm father image ... analysis ... hypnosis that stripped every secret from him, including his worst childhood nightmare.

His father had committed a violent, bloody suicide after one of the many quarrels with Dane's mother. Dane had found the body.

Two nights after the funeral, he had dreamed of his father's face, horror-filled, at the window. He knew now that it was a normal nightmare, caused by being forced to look at the face in the coffin, but the shock had lasted for years. It had bothered him again, after his discovery of the aliens, until a thorough check had proved without doubt that his father had been fully human, with a human, if tempestuous, childhood behind him.

* * * * *

Dr. Buehl was delighted. "You see, Dane? You know it was a nightmare, but you don't really believe it even now. Your father was an alien monster to you—no adult is quite human to a child. And that literal-minded self, your subconscious, saw him after he died. So there are alien monsters who return from death. Then you come to from a concussion. Harding is sprawled out unconscious, covered with blood—probably your blood, since you say he wasn't
wounded, later.

"But after seeing your father, you can't associate blood with yourself--you see it as a horrible wound on Harding. When he turns out to be alive, you're still in partial shock, with your subconscious dominant. And that has the answer already. There are monsters who come back from the dead! An exaggerated reaction, but nothing really abnormal. We'll have you out of here in no time."

No non-directive psychiatry for Buehl. The man beamed paternally, chuckling as he added what he must have considered the clincher. "Anyhow, even zombies can't stand fire, Dane, so you can stop worrying about Harding. I checked up on him. He was burned to a crisp in a hotel fire two months ago."

It was logical enough to shake Dane's faith, until he came across Milo Blanding's picture in a magazine article on society in St. Louis. According to the item, Milo was a cousin of the Blandings, whose father had vanished in Chile as a young man, and who had just rejoined the family. The picture was of Harding!

An alien could have gotten away by simply committing suicide and being carried from the rest home, but Dane had to do it the hard way, watching his chance and using commando tactics on a guard who had come to accept him as a harmless nut.

In St. Louis, he'd used the "Purloined Letter" technique to hide--going back to newspaper work and using almost his real name. It had seemed to work, too. But he'd been less lucky about Harding-Blanding. The man had been in Europe on some kind of a tour until his return only this last week.

Dane had seen him just once then--but long enough to be sure it was Harding--before he died again.

This time, it was in a drunken auto accident that seemed to be none of his fault, but left his body a mangled wreck.

* * * * *

It was almost dark when Dane dismissed the taxi at the false address, a mile from the entrance to the cemetery. He watched it turn back down the road, then picked up the valise with his camera and folding shovel. He shivered as he moved reluctantly ahead. War had proved that he would never be a brave man and the old fears of darkness and graveyards were still strong in him. But he had to know what the coffin contained now, if it wasn't already too late.

It represented the missing link in his picture of the aliens. What happened to them during the period of regrowth? Did they revert to their natural form? Were they at all conscious while the body reshaped itself into wholeness? Dane had puzzled over it night after night, with no answer.

Nor could he figure how they could escape from the grave. Perhaps a man could force his way out of some of the coffins he had inspected. The soil would still be soft and loose in the grave and a lot of the coffins and the boxes around them were strong in appearance only. A determined creature that could exist without much air for long enough might make it. But there were other caskets that couldn't be cracked, at least without the aid of outside help.

What happened when a creature that could survive even the poison of embalming fluids and the draining of all the blood woke up in such a coffin? Dane's mind skittered from it, as always, and then came back to it reluctantly.

There were still accounts of corpses turned up with the nails and hair grown long in the grave. Could normal tissues stand the current tricks of the morticians to have life enough for such growth? The possibility was absurd. Those cases had to be aliens--ones who hadn't escaped. Even they must die eventually in such a case--after weeks and months! It took time for hair to grow.

And there were stories of corpses that had apparently fought and twisted in their coffins still. What was it like for an alien then, going slowly mad while it waited for true death? How long did madness take?

He shivered again, but went steadily on while the cemetery fence appeared in the distance. He'd seen Blanding's coffin--and the big, solid metal casket around it that couldn't be cracked by any amount of effort and strength. He was sure the creature was still there, unless it had a confederate. But that wouldn't matter. An empty coffin would also be proof.

* * * * *

Dane avoided the main gate, unsure about whether there would be a watchman or not. A hundred feet away, there was a tree near the ornamental spikes of the iron fence. He threw his bag over and began shinnying up. It was difficult, but he made it finally, dropping onto the soft grass beyond. There was the trace of the Moon at times through the clouds, but it hadn't betrayed him, and there had been no alarm wire along the top of the fence.

He moved from shadow to shadow, his hair prickling along the base of his neck. Locating the right grave in the darkness was harder than he had expected, even with an occasional brief use of the small flashlight. But at last he found the marker that was serving until the regular monument could arrive.

His hands were sweating so much that it was hard to use the small shovel, but the digging of foxholes had given him experience and the ground was still soft from the gravediggers' work. He stopped once, as the Moon came out briefly. Again, a sound in the darkness above left him hovering and sick in the hole. But it must have been only some animal.
He uncovered the top of the casket with hands already blistering.  
Then he cursed as he realized the catches were near the bottom, making his work even harder.

He reached them at last, fumbling them open. The metal top of the casket seemed to be a dome of solid lead, and he had no room to maneuver, but it began swinging up reluctantly, until he could feel the polished wood of the coffin.

Dane reached for the lid with hands he could barely control. Fear was thick in his throat now. What could an alien do to a man who discovered it? Would it be Harding there--or some monstrous thing still changing? How long did it take a revived monster to go mad when it found no way to escape?

He gripped the shovel in one hand, working at the lid with the other. Now, abruptly, his nerves steadied, as they had done whenever he was in real battle. He swung the lid up and began groping for the camera.

His hand went into the silk-lined interior and found nothing! He was too late. Either Harding had gotten out somehow before the final ceremony or a confederate had already been here. The coffin was empty.

* * * * *

There were no warning sounds this time--only hands that slipped under his arms and across his mouth, lifting him easily from the grave. A match flared briefly and he was looking into the face of Buehl's chief strong-arm man.

"Hello, Mr. Phillips. Promise to be quiet and we'll release you. Okay?" At Dane's sickened nod, he gestured to the others. "Let him go. And, Tom, better get that filled in. We don't want any trouble from this."

Surprise came from the grave a moment later. "Hey, Burke, there's no corpse here!"

Burke's words killed any hopes Dane had at once. "So what? Ever hear of cremation? Lots of people use a regular coffin for the ashes."

"He wasn't cremated," Dane told him. "You can check up on that." But he knew it was useless.

"Sure, Mr. Phillips. We'll do that." The tone was one reserved for humoring madmen. Burke turned, gesturing. "Better come along, Mr. Phillips. Your wife and Dr. Buehl are waiting at the hotel."

The gate was open now, but there was no sign of a watchman; if one worked here, Sylvia's money would have taken care of that, of course. Dane went along quietly, sitting in the rubble of his hopes while the big car purred through the morning and on down Lindell Boulevard toward the hotel. Once he shivered, and Burke dug out hot brandied coffee. They had thought of everything, including a coat to cover his dirt-soiled clothes as they took him up the elevator to where Buehl and Sylvia were waiting for him.

She had been crying, obviously, but there were no tears or recriminations when she came over to kiss him. Funny, she must still love him--as he'd learned to his surprise he loved her. Under different circumstances ... 

"So you found me?" he asked needlessly of Buehl. He was operating on purely automatic habits now, the reaction from the night and his failure numbing him emotionally. "Jordan got in touch with you?"

Buehl smiled back at him. "We knew where you were all along, Dane. But as long as you acted normal, we hoped it might be better than the home. Too bad we couldn't stop you before you got all mixed up in this."

"So I suppose I'm committed to your booby-hatch again?"

Buehl nodded, refusing to resent the term. "I'm afraid so, Dane--for a while, anyhow. You'll find your clothes in that room. Why don't you clean up a little? Take a hot bath, maybe. You'll feel better."

* * * * *

Dane went in, surprised when no guards followed him. But they had thought of everything. What looked like a screen on the window had been recently installed and it was strong enough to prevent his escape. Blessed are the poor, for they shall be poorly guarded!

He was turning on the shower when he heard the sound of voices coming through the door. He left the water running and came back to listen. Sylvia was speaking.

"--seems so logical, so completely rational."

"It makes him a dangerous person," Buehl answered, and there was no false warmth in his voice now. "Sylvia, you've got to admit it to yourself. All the reason and analysis in the world won't convince him he's wrong. This time we'll have to use shock treatment. Burn over those memories, fade them out. It's the only possible course."

There was a pause and then a sigh. "I suppose you're right."

Dane didn't wait to hear more. He drew back, while his mind fought to accept the hideous reality. Shock treatment! The works, if what he knew of psychiatry was correct. Enough of it to erase his memories--a part of himself. It wasn't therapy Buehl was considering; it couldn't be.

It was the answer of an alien that had a human in its hands--one who knew too much!
He might have guessed. What better place for an alien than in the guise of a psychiatrist? Where else was there the chance for all the refined, modern torture needed to burn out a man's mind? Dane had spent ten years in fear of being discovered by them--and now Buehl had him.

Sylvia? He couldn't be sure. Probably she was human. It wouldn't make any difference. There was nothing he
could do through her. Either she was part of the game or she really thought him mad.

Dane tried the window again, but it was hopeless. There would be no escape this time. Buehl couldn't risk it. The shock treatment—or whatever Buehl would use under the name of shock treatment—would begin at once. It would be easy to slip, to use an overdose of something, to make sure Dane was killed. Or there were ways of making sure it didn't matter. They could leave him alive, but take his mind away.

In alien hands, human psychiatry could do worse than all the medieval torture chambers!

The sickness grew in his stomach as he considered the worst that could happen. Death he could accept, if he had to. He could even face the chance of torture by itself, as he had accepted the danger while trying to have his facts published. But to have his mind taken from him, a step at a time—to watch his personality, his ego, rotted away under him—and to know that he would wind up as a drooling idiot....

He made his decision, almost as quickly as he had come to realize what Buehl must be.

There was a razor in the medicine chest. It was a safety razor, of course, but the blade was sharp and it would be big enough. There was no time for careful planning. One of the guards might come in at any moment if they thought he was taking too long.

Some fear came back as he leaned over the wash basin, staring at his throat, fingering the suddenly murderous blade. But the pain wouldn't last long—a lot less than there would be under shock treatment, and less pain. He'd read enough to feel sure of that.

Twice he braced himself and failed at the last second. His mind flashed out in wild schemes, fighting against what it knew had to be done.

The world still had to be warned! If he could escape, somehow ... if he could still find a way.... He couldn't quit, no matter how impossible things looked.

But he knew better. There was nothing one man could do against the aliens in this world they had taken over. He'd never had a chance. Man had been chained already by carefully developed ridicule against superstition, by carefully indoctrinated gobbledegook about insanity, persecution complexes, and all the rest.

For a second, Dane even considered the possibility that he was insane. But he knew it was only a blind effort to cling to life. There had been no insanity in him when he'd groped for evidence in the coffin and found it empty!

He leaned over the wash basin, his eyes focused on his throat, and his hand came down and around, carrying the razor blade through a lethal semicircle.

Dane Phillips watched fear give place to sickness on his face as the pain lanced through him and the blood spurted.

He watched horror creep up to replace the sickness while the bleeding stopped and the gash began closing.

By the time he recognized his expression as the same one he'd seen on his father's face at the window so long ago, the wound was completely healed.

--LESTER DEL REY

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Contents

DEAD WORLD
By JACK DOUGLAS

Out on the ice-buried planet, Commander Red Stone led his Free Companions to almost certain death. They died for a dangerous dream that had only one chance in a thousand trillion to come true. Is there a better reason for dying?

... although the most recent star to die, RNAC 89778 in the distant Menelaus galaxy (common name, Menelaus XII), had eight inhabited planets, only some one thousand people of the fifth planet escaped and survived as a result of a computer error which miscalculated the exact time by two years. Due to basic psycho-philo maladjustments the refugees of Menelaus XII-5 are classified as anti-social-types-B-6 and must be considered unstable. All anti-social-types-B-6 are barred from responsible positions in United Galaxies by order of the Inter-Galactic Council.

--Short History of The United Galaxies

Yuan Saltario started it. He was serving in my Company and he was one of them. A Menelaus XII-5 "unstable,"
and don't ever call that damned little planet by its number if you meet one of them. They call it Nova-Maurania. But you won't meet one of them. Or maybe you will, maybe they did make it. I like to think they did.

There were a lot of them in the Companies in 3078. Restless men. The Companies were the logical place for them. We're still classified anti-social-B-6, too. Every year it's harder to get recruits, but we still have to be careful who we take in. We took Yuan Saltario. There was something about him from the very start.

"Why do you want to join a Free Company?" He was a short, humanoid type with deep black eyes and a thin, lipless mouth that never smiled.

"I'm an anti-social. I like to fight. I want to fight."

"A misfit joining the misfits? A grudge against the Council? It's not good enough, mister, we live on the Council. Try again."

Saltario's black eyes stared without a flicker. "I don't think of it that way. I think of a man with personal integrity," Saltario said. I suppose I should have seen it then, the rock he carried deep inside him. It might have saved thirty thousand good men. But I was thinking of myself. Commander Red Stone of the Red Company, Earthmen. Only we're not all Earthmen now, every year there are fewer recruits, and it won't be long before we die out and the Council will have the last laugh. Old Red Stone, the Traitor of the War of Survival, the little finger of my left hand still missing and telling the Universe I was a very old soldier of the outlawed Free Companies hanging onto life on a rocky planet of the distant Salaman galaxy. Back at the old stand because United Galaxies still need us. In a way it's a big joke. Two years after Rajay-Ben and I had a bellyful of the Glorious War of Survival and they chased us all the way out here, they turned right around and made the peace. A joke on me, but sometimes I like to think that our runout was the thing that made them think and make peace. When you've been a soldier for thirty-five years you like to win battles, but you like to feel you helped bring peace, too.

I said, "Personal integrity. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? So you like personal integrity? All right, Saltario, are you sure you know what you're getting into? We're 60 million light years from Galaxy Center, 10 million from the nearest United Galaxy city. We've got no comforts, no future, nothing to do but fight. A woman in her right mind won't look at us, if they see you in uniform they'll spit on you, if they catch you out of uniform they'll kill you."

Saltario shrugged. "I like to eat. I've got nowhere to go. All I've got is myself and a big piece of ice I called home."

I nodded. "Okay. We fight small wars for good profits. It's not Earth out here, but we've got four nice suns, plenty of Lukanian whisky Rajay-Ben taught the locals to make, and we're our own masters. The United Galaxies leaves us pretty much alone unless they need us. You do your job, and your job is what I tell you to do, period. You got that straight?"

Saltario very nearly smiled. "It sounds good to me, sir."

"I hope it'll sound good in a year, Saltario, because once you're in you don't get out except feet first. Is that clear? I have life and death rights over you. You owe allegiance to the Red Company and me and to no one else. Got that? Today your best friends are the men of Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Fourth Free Patrol, and your worst enemies are the men of Mandasiva's Sirian O Company. Tomorrow Rajay-Ben's boys may be your worst enemies, and Mandasiva's troops your best friends. It all depends on the contract. A Company on the same contract is a friend, a Company against the contract is an enemy. You'll drink with a man today, and kill him tomorrow. Got it? If you kill a Free Companion without a contract you go to court-martial. If you kill a citizen of the United Galaxies except in a battle under contract I throw you to the wolves and that means you're finished. That's the way it is."

"Yes, sir." Saltario never moved a muscle. He was rigid.

"Right," I said, "get your gear, see the Adjutant and sign the agreement. I think you'll do."

Saltario left. I sat back in my chair and thought about how many non-Earthmen I was taking into the Company. Maybe I should have been thinking about this one single non-Earthman and the something he was carrying inside him, but I didn't, and it cost the Companies thirty thousand men we couldn't afford to lose. We can't afford to lose one man. There are only a hundred Companies now, twenty thousand men each, give or take a few thousand depending on how the last contract went. Life is good in the United Galaxies now that they've disarmed and outlawed all war again, and our breed is dying out faster than it did in the 500 years of peace before the War of Survival. Too many of the old Companions like me went west in the War of Survival. The Galactic Council know they need us, know that you can't change all living creatures into good Galactic citizens overnight, so they let us go on fighting for anyone in the Universe who wants to take something from someone else, or who thinks someone else
wants to take something from him. And even the mighty United Galaxies needs guards for expeditions to the unexplored galaxies. But they don't like us and they don't want us. They don't cut off our little fingers anymore, but we have to wear our special black uniforms when we go into United territory under penalty of a quick death. Humane, of course, they just put us to sleep gently and for keeps. And they've got a stockpile of ionic bombs ready at all times in case we get out of hand. We don't have ionic weapons, that's part of the agreement and they watch us. They came close to using them down there in the frozen waste of Menelaus XII, but thirty thousand of us died without ionicics. We killed each other. They liked that, even if they didn't like what happened.

Do you know what it means to be lost? Really lost? I'm lost, if that means I know I'll never go back to live on Earth. But I know that Earth is still there to go back to, and I can dream of going home. Yuan Saltario and the other refugees have no home to go back to. They can't even dream. They sat in that one ship that escaped and watched their planet turn into a lifeless ball of ice that would circle dead and frozen forever around its burned-out star. A giant tomb that carried under its thick ice their homes and their fields and their loves. And they could not even hope and dream. Or I did not think they could.

Saltario had been with us a year when we got the contract to escort the survey mission to Nova-Maurania. A private Earth commercial mining firm looking for minerals under the frozen wastes of the dead planet. Rajay-Ben was in on the contract. We took two battalions, one from my Red Company, and one from Rajay-Ben's Lukanian Patrol. My Sub-Commander was Pete Colenso, old Mike Colenso's boy. It all went fine for a week or so, routine guard and patrol. The survey team wouldn't associate with us, of course, but we were used to that. We kept our eyes open and our mouths shut. That's our job, and we give value for money received. So we were alert and ready. But it wasn't the attack that nearly got us this time. It was the cold of the dead planet lost in absolute zero and absolute darkness.

Nova-Maurania was nearly 40 percent uranium, and who could resist that? A Centaurian trading unit did not resist the lure. The attack was quick and hard. A typical Lukanian Patrol attack. My Company was pinned down at the first volley from those damned smoky blasters of the Lukans. All I could see was the same shimmering lights I had learned to know so well in the War of Survival against Lukania. Someday maybe I'll find out how to see a Lukan, Rajay-Ben has worked with me a long time to help, but when the attack came this time all I could do was eat ice and beam a help call to Rajay-Ben. That Centaurian trading unit was a cheap outfit, they had hired only one battalion of Arjay-Ben's Ninth Lukanian Free Patrol, and Rajay-Ben flanked them right off that planet. I got my boys on their feet and we chased Arjay's men half way back to Salaman with Rajay-Ben laughing like a hyena the whole way.

"Dip me in mud, Red boy, I'd give a prime contract for one gander at old Arjay-Ben's face. He's blowing a gasket!"

I said, "Nice flank job."

Rajay-Ben laughed so hard I could see his pattern of colored light shaking like a dancing rainbow. "I took two Sub-Commanders, wait'll I hit that bullet-head for ransom!"

Then we stopped laughing. We had won the battle, but Arjay-Ben was a crafty old soldier and his sabotage squad had wrecked our engines and our heating units. We were stuck on a frozen planet without heat.

Young Colenso turned white. "What do we do?"

I said, "Beam for help and pray we don't freeze first."

They had missed our small communications reactor unit. We sent out our call, and we all huddled around the small reactor. There might be enough heat out of it to let us live five hours. If we were lucky. It was the third hour when Yuan Saltario began to talk. Maybe it was the nearness of death.

"I was twenty-two. Portario was the leader on our planet. He found the error when we had one ship ready. We had three days. No time to get the other ships ready. He said we were lucky, the other planets didn't have even one ship ready. Not even time for United Galaxies to help. Portario chose a thousand of us to go. I was one. At first I felt very good, you know? I was really happy. Until I found out that my wife couldn't go. Not fit enough. United Galaxies had beamed the standards to us. Funny how you don't think about other people until something hurts you. I'd been married a year. I told them it was both of us or neither of us. I told Portario to tell United Galaxies they couldn't break up a family and to hell with their standards. They laughed at me. Not Portario, the Council. What did they care, they would just take another man. My wife begged me to go. She cried so much I had to agree to go. I loved her too much to be able to stay and see the look on her face as we both died when she knew I could have gone. On the ship before we took off I stood at a port and looked down at her. A small girl trying to smile at me. She waved once before they led her away from the rocket. All hell was shaking the planet already, had been for months, but all I saw was a small girl waving once, just once. She's still here, somewhere down there under the ice."
The cold was slowly creeping into us. It was hard to move my mouth, but I said, "She loved you, she wanted you to live."

"Without her, without my home, I'm as dead as the planet. I feel frozen. She's like that dead sun out there, and I'll circle around her until someone gets me and ends it." Saltario seemed to be seeing something. "I'm beginning to forget what she looked like. I don't want to forget! I can't forget her on this planet. The way it was! It was a beautiful place, perfect! I don't want to forget her!"

Colenso said, "You won't have long to remember."

* * * * *

But Colenso was wrong. My Third Battalion showed up when we had just less than an hour to live. They took us off. The Earth mining outfit haggled over the contract because the job had not been finished and I had to settle for two-third contract price. Rajay-Ben did better when he ransomed Arjay-Ben's two Sub-Commanders. It wasn't a bad deal and I would have been satisfied, except that something had happened to Yuan Saltario.

Maybe it made him realize that he did not want to die after all. Or maybe it turned him space-happy and he began to dream. A dream of his own born up there in the cold of his dead planet. A dream that nearly cost me my Company.

I did not know what that dream was until Saltario came into my office a year later. He had a job for the Company.

"How many men?" I asked.

"Our Company and Rajay-Ben's Patrol," Saltario said.

"Full strength?"

"Yes, sir."

"Price?"

"Standard, sir," Saltario said. "The party will pay."

"Just a trip to your old planet?"

"That's all," Saltario said. "A guard contract. The hiring party just don't want any interference with their project."

"Two full Companies? Forty thousand men? They must expect to need a lot of protecting."

"United Galaxies opposes the project. Or they will if they get wind of it."

I said, "United opposes a lot of things, what's special about this scheme?"

Saltario hesitated, then looked at me with those flat black eyes. "Ionics."

It's not a word you say, or hear, without a chill somewhere deep inside. Not even me and I know a man can survive ionic weapons. I know because I did once. Weapons so powerful I'm one of the last men alive who saw them in action. Mathematically the big ones could wipe out a Galaxy. I saw a small one destroy a star in ten seconds. I watched Saltario for a long time. It seemed a long time, anyway. It was probably twenty seconds. I was wondering if he had gone space-crazy for keeps. And I was thinking of how I could find out what it was all about in time to stop it.

I said, "A hundred Companies won't be enough. Saltario, have you ever seen or heard what an ionic bomb can ..."

Saltario said, "Not weapons, peaceful power."

"Even that's out and you know it," I said. "United Galaxies won't even touch peaceful ionics, too dangerous to even use."

"You can take a look first."

"A good look," I said.

I alerted Rajay-Ben and we took two squads and a small ship and Saltario directed us to a tall mountain that jutted a hundred feet above the ice of Nova-Maurania. I was not surprised. In a way I think I knew from the moment Saltario walked into my office. Whatever it was Saltario was part of it. And I had a pretty good idea what it was. The only question was how. But I didn't have time to think it out any farther. In the Companies you learn to feel danger.

The first fire caught four of my men. Then I was down on the ice. They were easy to see. Black uniforms with white wedges. Pete O'Hara's White Wedge Company, Earthmen. I don't like fighting other Earthmen, but a job's a job and you don't ask questions in the Companies. It looked like a full battalion against our two squads. On the smooth ice surface there was no cover except the jutting mountain top off to the right. And no light in the absolute darkness of a dead star. But we could see through our viewers, and so could they. They outnumbered us ten to one. Rajay-Ben's voice came through the closed circuit.

"Bad show, Red, they got our pants down!"

"You call it," I answered.

"Break silence!"
Surrender. When a Company breaks silence in a battle it means surrender. There was no other way. And I had a pretty good idea that the Council itself was behind O'Hara on this job. If it was ionics involved, they wouldn't ransom us. The Council had waited a long time to catch Red Stone in an execution offense. They wouldn't miss.

But forty of our men were down already.

"Okay," I beamed over the circuit, "break silence. We've had it Rajay."

"Council offense, Red."

"Yeah."

Well, I'd had a lot of good years. Maybe I'd been a soldier too long. I was thinking just like that when the sudden flank attack started. From the right. Heavy fire from the cover of the solitary mountain top. O'Hara's men were dropping. I stared through my viewer. On that mountain I counted the uniforms of twenty-two different Companies. That was very wrong. Whoever Saltario was fronting for could not have the power or the gold to hire twenty-four Companies including mine and Rajay-Ben's. And the fire was heavy but not that heavy. But whoever they were they were very welcome. We had a chance now. And I was making my plans when the tall old man stood up on the small, jutting top of that mountain. The tall old man stood up and a translating machine boomed out.

"All of you! O'Hara's men! Look at this!"

I saw it. In a beam of light on the top of that mountain it looked like a small neutron-source machine. But it wasn't. It was an ionic beam projector.

The old man said, "Go home."

They went. They went fast and silent. And I knew where they were going. Not to Salaman. O'Hara would have taken one look at that machine and be half way to United Galaxy Center before he had stopped seeing it. I felt like taking that trip myself. But I had agreed to look and I would look. If we were lucky we would have forty-eight hours to look and run.

I fell in what was left of my Company behind the men that had saved us. More Company uniforms than I had ever seen in one place. They said nothing. Just walked into a hole in that mountain. Into a cave. And in the cave, at the far end, a door opened. An elevator. We followed the tall old man into the elevator and it began to descend. The elevator car went down for a long time. At last I could see a faint glow far below. The glow grew brighter and the car stopped. Far below the glow was still brighter. We all stepped out into a long corridor cut from solid rock. I estimated that we were at least two hundred miles down and the glow was hundreds of miles deeper. We went through three sealed doors and emerged into a vast room. A room bright with light and filled with more men in Company uniforms, civilians, even women. At least a thousand. And I saw it. The thousand refugees, all of them. Gathered from all the Companies, from wherever they had been in the Galaxies. Gathered here in a room two hundred miles into the heart of their dead planet. A room filled with giant machines. Ionic machines. Highly advanced ionic power reactors.

The old man stood in front of his people and spoke. "I am Jason Portario, I thank you for coming."

I broke in. "Ionic power is an execution offense. You know that. How the hell did you get all this ..."

"I know the offense, Commander," Portario said, "and I know you. You're a fair man. You're a brave man. It doesn't matter where we got the power, many men are dead to get it, but we have it, and we will keep it. We have a job to do."

I said, "After that stunt out there you've about as much chance as a snowball in hell. O'Hara's half way to Galaxy Center. Look, with a little luck we get you out to Salaman. If you leave all this equipment I might be able to hide you until it blows over."

The old man shrugged. "I would have preferred not to show our hand, but we had to save you. I was aware that the Council would find us out sooner or later, they missed the ionic material a month ago. But that is unimportant. The important matter is will you take our job? All we need is another two days, perhaps three. Can you hold off an attack for that long?"

"Why?" I asked.

Portario smiled. "All right, Commander, you should know all we plan. Sit down, and let me finish before you speak."

I sat. Rajay-Ben sat. The agitation of his colored lights showed that he was as disturbed as I was. The thousand Nova-Mauranians stood there in the room and watched us. Yuan Saltario stood with his friends. I could feel his eyes on me. Hot eyes. As if something inside that lost man was burning again. Portario lighted a pipe. I had not seen a pipe since I was a child. The habit was classified as ancient usage in the United Galaxies. Portario saw me staring. He held his pipe and looked at it.

"In a way, Commander," the old man said, "this pipe is my story. On Nova-Maurania we liked a pipe. We liked
a lot of the old habits. Maybe we should have died with all the others. You know, I was the one who found the error. Sometimes I'm not at all sure my friends here thank me for it. Our planet is dead, Commander, and so are we. We're dead inside. But we have a dream. We want to live again. And to live again our planet must live again." The old man paused as if trying to be sure of telling it right. "We mean no harm to anyone. All we want is our life back. We don't want to live forever like lumps of ice circling around a dead heart. What we plan may kill us all, but we feel it is worth the risk. We have thousands of ionic power reactors. We have blasted out Venturi tubes. We found life still deep in the center of this planet. It is all ready now. With all the power we have we will break the hold of our dead sun and send this planet off into space! We ..."

I said, "You're insane! It can't ..."

"But it can, Commander. It's a great risk, yes, but it can be done, my calculations are perfect! We want to leave this dead system, go off into space and find a new star that will bring life back to our planet! A green, live, warm Nova-Maurania once again!"

Rajay-Ben was laughing. "That's the craziest damned dream I ever sat still for. You know what your chances of being picked up by another star are? Picked up just right? Why ..."

Portario said, "We have calculated the exact initial thrust, the exact tangential velocity, the precise orbital path we need. If all goes exactly, I emphasize, exactly, to the last detail as we have planned it we can do it! Our chances of being caught by the correct star in the absolutely correct position are one in a thousand trillion, but we can do it!"

It was so impossible I began to believe he was right. "If you aren't caught just right?"

Portario's black eyes watched me. "We could burn up or stay frozen and lifeless. We could drift in space forever as cold and dead as we are now and our ionic power won't last forever. The forces we will use could blow the planet apart. But we are going to try. We would rather die than live as walking dead men in this perfect United Galaxies we do not want."

The silence in the room was like a Salaman fog. Thick silence broken only by the steady hum of the machines deep beneath us in the dead planet. A wild, impossible dream of one thousand lost souls. A dream that would destroy them, and they did not care. There was something about it all that I liked.

I said, "Why not get Council approval?"

Portario smiled. "Council has little liking for wild dreams, Commander. It would not be considered as advancing the future of United Galaxies' destiny. Then there are the ionics." And Portario hesitated. "And there is the danger of imbalance, Galactic imbalance. I have calculated carefully, the danger is remote, but Council is not going to take even a remote chance."

Yuan Saltario broke in. "All they care about is their damned sterile destiny! They don't care about people. Well we do! We care about something to live for. The hell with the destiny of the Galaxies! They don't know, and we'll be gone before they do know."

"They know plenty now. O'Hara's beamed them in."

"So we must hurry," Portario said. "Three days, Commander, will you protect us for three days?"

A Council offense punishable by instant destruction with United Galaxies reserve ionic weapons in the hands of the super-secret police and disaster teams. And three days is a long time. I would be risking my whole Company. I heard Rajay-Ben laugh.

"Blast me, Red, it's so damned crazy I'm for it. Let's give it a shot."

I did not know then how much it would really cost us. If I had I might not have agreed. Or maybe I would have, it was good to know people could still have such dreams in our computer age.

"Okay," I said, "beam the full Companies and try to get one more. Mandasiva's Sirian boys would be good. We'll split the fee three ways."

"Okay," I beamed, "get rolling fast."

"Well, we beamed the Companies and in twenty minutes they were on their way. Straight into the biggest trouble we had since the War of Survival. I expected trouble, but I didn't know how much. Pete Colenso tipped me off. Pete spoke across the light years on our beam. "Mandasiva says okay if we guarantee the payment. I've deposited the bond with him and we're on our way. But, Red, something's funny."

"What?"

"This place is empty. The whole damned galaxy out here is like a desert. Every Company has moved out somewhere."

"Okay," I beamed. "get rolling fast."

There was only one client who could hire all the Companies at one time. United Galaxies itself. We were in for it. I had expected perhaps ten Companies, not three against 97, give or take a few out on other jobs. It gave me a chill. Not the odds, but if Council was that worried maybe there was bad danger. But I'd given my word and a
Companion keeps his word. We had one ace in the hole, a small one. If the other Companies were not here in Menelaus yet, they must have rendezvoused at Galaxy Center. It was the kind of "follow-the-book" mistake United would make. It gave us a day and a half. We would need it.

They came at dawn on the second day. We were deployed across five of the dead planets of Menelaus XII in a ring around Nova-Maurania. They came fast and hard, and Portario and his men had at least ten hours work left before they could fire their reactors and pray. Until then we did the praying. It didn't help.

Mandasiva's command ship went at the third hour. A Lukan blaster got it. By the fourth hour I had watched three of my sub-command ships go. A Sirian force beam got one, an Earth fusion gun got another, and the third went out of action and rammed O'Hara's command ship that had been leading their attack against us. That third ship of mine was Pete Colenso's. Old Mike would have been proud of his boy. I was sick. Pete had been a good boy. So had O'Hara. Not a boy, O'Hara, but the next to the last of old Free Companion from Earth. I'm the last, and I said a silent good-bye to O'Hara. By the sixth hour Rajay-Ben had only ten ships left. I had twelve. Five thousand of my men were gone. Eight thousand of Rajay-Ben's Lukans. The Sirians of Mandasiva's O Company were getting the worst of it, and in the eighth hour Mandasiva's second in command surrendered. It would be over soon, too soon. And the dream would be over with the battle. I broke silence.

"Red Stone calling. Do you read me? Commander Stone calling. Request conference. Repeat, request conference."

A face appeared on the inter-Company beam screen. The cold, blank, hard-bitten face of the only Free Company Commander senior to me now that O'Hara was gone, Jake Campesino of the Cygne Black Company. "Are you surrendering, Stone?"

"No. I want to speak to my fellow Companions."

Campesino's voice was like ice. "Violation! You know the rules, Stone. Silence cannot be broken in battle. I will bring charges. You're through, Stone."

I said, "Okay, crucify me later. But hear me now."

Campesino said, "Close silence or surrender."

It was no good. We'd had it. And across the distance of battle Rajay-Ben's face appeared on the screen. The colored lights that were a Lukan's face and I knew enough to know that the shimmering lights were mad. "The hell with them, Red, let's go all the damned way!"

And a new face appeared on the screen. A face I knew too well. First Councillor Roark. "Stone! You've done a lot in your day but this is the end, you hear me? You're defending a madman in a Council crime. Do you realize the risk? Universal imbalance! The whole pattern of galaxies could be destroyed! We'll destroy you for this, Stone. An ionic project without Council authorization."

"You heard Commander Stone, men. Close off, Stone, give me a minute to get the vote."

"You win, Red," Campesino said. He was smiling at me. "Go home, Councillor, battle's over."

The Councillor went. He said there would be hell to pay, and maybe there will be, but I don't think so, they still need us. We lost thirty thousand good men in all the Companies. But when the next dawn came Nova-Maurania was gone. I don't know where they went, or what happened to them. Here in my stronghold I sometimes imagine them safe and rebuilding a green world where they can smoke pipes and live their own lives. And sometimes I imagine them all dead and drifting out there in the infinity of space. I don't think they would mind too much, either way.

THE END
DIVINITY
By Joseph Samachson

Bradley had one fear in his life. He had to escape regeneration. To do that, he was willing to take any chance, coward though he was—even if it meant that he had to become a god!

Bradley seemed to have escaped regeneration. Now he had only death to worry about.

Ten minutes before, he had been tumbling through the air head over heels, helpless and despairing. And before that—

He remembered how his heart had been in his mouth as he had crept down the corridor of the speeding ship. He could hear Malevski's voice coming faintly through one of the walls, and had been tempted to run back, fearful of being shot down on the spot if he were caught. He had fought back the temptation and kept on. No one had seen him as he crept into the lifeboat.

"This is your one chance," he told himself. "You have to take it. If they get you back to port, you're finished."

Luck had been with him. They were broadcasting the results of the Mars-Earth matches at the time, and most of the crew were grouped around the visors. He had picked the moment when news came of a sensational upset, and for a minute or two after the lifeboat blasted off, no one realized what had happened. When the truth did penetrate, they had a hard time swinging the ship around, and by then the lifeboat was out of radar range. He was free.

He had exulted wildly for a moment, until it struck him that freedom in space might be a doubtful gift. He would have to get to some civilized port, convince the port authorities that he had been shipwrecked and somehow separated from the other crew members, and then lose himself quickly in the crowd of people that he hoped would fill the place. There would be risks, but he would take them. It would be better than running out of air and food in space.

It had been the best possible plan, and it had gone wrong, all wrong. He had been caught, before he knew it, in the gravity of a planet he had overlooked. The lifeboat had torn apart under the combined stresses of its forward momentum and its side rockets blasting full force, and he had been hurled free in his space suit, falling slowly at first, then faster, faster, faster—

The automatic parachutes had suddenly sprung into operation when he reached a critical speed, and he had slowed down and stopped tumbling. He fell more gently, feet first, and when he landed it was with a shock that jarred but did no real damage.

Slowly he picked himself up and fumbled at the air valve. Something in the intake tubes had jammed under the shock of landing, and the air was no longer circulating properly. Filled with the moisture of his own breath, it felt hot and clammy, and clouded the viewplates.

If he had kept all his wits about him he would have tried to remember, before he took a chance, whether the planet had an oxygen atmosphere, and whether the oxygen was of sufficient concentration to support human life. Not that he had any real choice, but it would have been good to know. As it was, he turned the air valve automatically, and listened nervously as the stale air hissed out and the fresh air hissed in.

He took a deep breath. It didn't kill him. Instead, it sent his blood racing around with new energy. Slowly the moisture evaporated from his viewplates. Slowly he began to see.

He perceived that he was not alone. A group of people stood in front of him, respectful, their own eyes full of fear and wonder. Some one uttered a hoarse cry and pointed at his helmet. The unclouding of the viewplates must have stricken them with awe.

The air was wonderful to breathe. He would have liked to remove his helmet and fill his lungs with it unhampered, expose his face to its soft caress, expand his chest with the constriction of the suit. But these people—

They must have seen him tumble down from the sky and land unhurt. They carried food and flowers, and now they were kneeling down to him as to a—Suddenly he realized. To them he was a god.

The thought of it made him weak. To Malevski and the ship's crew he was a criminal, a cheap chiseler and pickpocket, almost a murderer, escaping credit for that crime only by grace of his own good luck and his victim's thick skull. They had felt such contempt for him that they hadn't even bothered to guard him too carefully. They had thought him a complete coward, without the courage to risk an escape, without the intelligence to find the opportunities that might be offered to him.

They hadn't realized how terrified he was of the thing with which they threatened him. Regeneration, the giving up of his old identity? Not for him. They hadn't realized that he preferred the risks of a dangerous escape to the
certainty of that.

And here he was a god.

He lifted his hand without thinking, to wipe away the perspiration that covered his forehead. But before the hand touched his helmet he realized what he was doing, and let the hand drop again.

To the people watching him the gesture must have seemed one of double significance. It was at once a sign of acceptance of their food and flowers, and their offer of good-will, and at the same time an order to withdraw. They bowed, and moved backwards away from him. Behind him they left their gifts.

They seemed human, enough for the features on the men's faces to impress him as strong and resourceful, for him to recognize that the women were attractive. And if they were human, the food must be fit for human beings. Whether it was or wasn't, however, again he had no choice.

He waited until they were out of sight, and then, stiffly, he removed his helmet and ate. The food tasted good. And with his helmet off, with the wind on his face, and the woods around him whispering in his ears, it was a meal fit for the being they thought him to be.

He was a god. Possibly it was the space suit which made him one, especially the goggle-eyed helmet. He could take no chance of becoming an ordinary mortal, and that would mean that he would have to wear the space suit continually. Or at least the helmet. That, he decided, was what he would do. That would leave his body reasonably free, and at the same time impress them with the fact that he was different from them.

By manipulating the air valve he would be able to make the viewplates cloud and uncloud at will, thus giving dramatic expression to his feelings. It would be a pleasant game to play until he had learned something of their language. It would be safer than trying to make things clear to them with speech and gestures that they could not understand anyway.

He wondered how long it would be before Malevski would find the shattered lifeboat drifting in space, and then trace its course and decide where he had landed. That would be the end of his divinity. Meanwhile, until then—

Until then he was a god. Unregenerated. Permanently unregenerated. Holding his helmet, he threw back his head and laughed loud and long, and wondered what his mother would have thought.

For awhile he was being left alone. They were afraid of him, of course, fearful of intruding with their merely mortal affairs upon the meditations of so divine a being. Later, however, curiosity and perhaps a desire to show him off to newcomers might draw them back. In the interval, it would be well to find out what sort of place this was in which he had landed.

He looked around him. There were trees, with sharp green branches, sharp green twigs, sharp red leaves. He shuddered as he thought of what would have happened to him if he had fallen on the point of a branch. The trees seemed rigid and unbending in the wind that caressed his face. There were no birds that he could see. Small black objects bounded from one branch to another as if engaged in complicated games of tag. He wondered if the games were as serious as the one he had been playing with Malevski, with himself as It.

There were no ground animals in sight. If any showed up later, they couldn't be too dangerous, not with the natives living here in such apparent peace and contentment. There probably wouldn't be anything that his pocket gun, which he had taken the precaution to remove from the lifeboat before that shattered, wouldn't be able to handle.

Near him was a strange spring, or little river, or whatever you might call it. It broke from the ground, ran along the hard rocky surface for a dozen feet, and then plunged underground again. There were other springs of a similar nature scattered here and there, and now he realized that their combined murmuring was the noise he had mistaken, on first removing his helmet, for the rustle of the wind in the woods.

He would have enough to drink. The natives would bring him food. What else could any reasonable man want? It wasn't the kind of life he had dreamed of. No Martian whiskey, no drugs, no night spots, no bigtime gamblers slapping him on the back and calling him "pal," no brassy blondes giving him the eye. Still, it was better than the life he had actually lived, much better. It would do, it would have to do.

From what he had seen of the natives, he liked them—and feared them. For all their mistaken faith in him, they seemed to be no fools. How many times before had men from some supposedly superior civilization dropped in upon the people of a new world and made that first impression of divinity, only to have the original attitude of worship by the natives give way to disillusion and contempt? Who was that fellow they told about in the history books he had read as a kid? Cortez, way back on Earth, when that planet itself had offered unexplored territory. And later on it had happened on one of the moons of Jupiter, and on several planets outside the System. The explorers had been gods, until they had been found out. Then they had been savage murderers, plunderers, devils.

It would be too bad if he were found out. He was one against them all, he would never be able to fight off so many enemies. More than that, he was a stranger here, he needed friends. No, he mustn't be found out.

"Better put on your helmet, dope," he told himself savagely. "They'll be coming back soon, and if they find you without it—" He put on his helmet, still muttering to himself. It wouldn't make any difference if he were overheard.
They didn't know Earth language and would take his words for oracular utterances. He could talk to himself all he wanted, and from the looks of things, there would be no one to understand him. He hoped he didn't grow crazy and eccentric, like those hermits who had been lost alone in space for too many years.

The helmet was the first nuisance. There would be others too. He couldn't even talk in what had become his natural manner, with a whine in every word, a whine that came from being treated with contempt by police and fellow-criminals alike. A god had to speak with slow gravity, with dignity. A god had to walk like a god. A god had endless responsibilities here, it seemed.

He thought again of his mother. Ever since he could remember, it had been, "Georgie, wipe your nose!" and, "Georgie, keep your fingers out of the cake!" and Georgie do this and don't do that. A fine way to speak to a god. Even after he had grown up, his mother had continued to treat him like a baby. She had never got over examining his face and his ears and his fingernails to make sure that he had cleaned them properly. He couldn't so much as comb his hair to suit her; all through his abortive attempt at college, and later at a job, she had done it for him.

But she had been a lioness in his defense later on, when he had given way to that first irresistible impulse to dip his fingers in the till and get away with what he thought would be unnoticed petty cash. It had been her fault that the thing had happened, of course. She could have given him a decent amount of spending money, instead of doling it out to him from his own wages as if she were giving money for candy to a schoolboy. She could have treated him more like the man he was supposed to be.

Still, he couldn't complain. She had stuck to him all the way through, whatever the charges against him. When that lug of a traveling salesman had accused her Georgie of picking his pockets, and that female refugee from a TV studio had charged poor harmless Georgie with slugging her, it was his mother who had stood up in court and denounced them, and solemnly told judge and jury what a sweet, kind, helplessly innocent lamb her Georgie was. It wasn't her fault if no one had quite believed her.

Now he was on his own, without any possibility of help from her. And in what the ads called a "responsible position" that she had never so much as dreamed he could fill.

Unfortunately, now that he had reached so exalted a level, there seemed to be few possibilities of promotion. There appeared only the chance, on the one hand, that the natives would find him out and slaughter him, and on the other that Malevski would track him down and bring him back to Earth for the punishment he dreaded.

It was a good thing he had put on his helmet. Not far away, a group of the natives was approaching, laden with more food and flowers. It was larger than the previous group. Evidently, as he had anticipated, they were showing him off to newcomers.

He came to a stately halt and waited for them to approach. He could see the surprise on their faces as they noted his change of costume, and he watched nervously as they stopped to whisper among themselves. It would be too bad for him if they didn't like it.

But they didn't seem to mind. One of them, a very impressive old man with green hair flecked with red, stepped in front of the others and made a speech, a melodic speech full of liquid sounds that were neither quite vowels nor consonants. He didn't have the slightest idea of what the individual words meant. But the significance of the speech as a whole was clear enough. As it came to an end, they presented him with more food and flowers.

Bradley cleared his throat. And then, with as deep and impressive a voice as he could manage, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to accept your nomination. I promise you that if elected I shall keep none of my promises."

It was his first speech to them, and he enjoyed making it so much that every time he saw them during the next few days—they settled down to coming twice a day, morning and night—he made it again, with variations, listing the wonderful things he would do for them if elected to the office.

After awhile, as he began to enjoy the ceremony for its own sake, he didn't mind at all putting the helmet on for two short periods every day. Having so little contact with them, he could learn their language only very slowly. He could distinguish the word for flowers from that for food, although he himself could pronounce neither. He knew the names of a few plants, a few parts of the body. And he learned a few names of people. The red-green haired old man was, as close as he could make the sounds, Yanyoo. He took the trouble to notice that the prettiest girl was Aoooya. He learned a few names of a few plants, a few parts of the body. And he learned a few names of people. The red-green haired old man could distinguish the word for flowers from that for food, although he himself could pronounce neither. He knew the names of a few plants, a few parts of the body. And he learned a few names of people. The red-green haired old man was, as close as he could make the sounds, Yanyoo. He took the trouble to notice that the prettiest girl was Aoooya.

At first everything had been exceedingly peaceful. But about a week after his arrival—he couldn't be sure exactly how many days had passed, because he hadn't kept count—he learned of some of the dangers they faced.

It was while they were holding the morning ceremony that the thing came out of the forest. At first he thought that a tree had moved. It was green, with reddish blotches like clusters of needle leaves, and it seemed to ooze forward toward them from among the trees. Aoooya noticed it first, and pointed and screamed. It was the size of a tiger, thought Bradley, and might be even more dangerous. He had difficulty keeping his eyes on the rapidly moving creature through the goggles of his helmet. He was aware of gleaming eyes, of two rows of dull green teeth, and of muscles that rippled under the green fur.
Several of the men had little blowpipes, through which they released a shower of darts. But the darts bounced off the fur, and the thing came on. Bradley fumbled for his gun, and almost dropped it in his excitement. When he finally brought it up into aiming position, his hand was trembling, and his finger could hardly catch the trigger.

The thing leaped into the air at the old man, Yanyoo, just as the gun went off. The body vaporized first, leaving for a fraction of a second the fierce head and the powerful legs apparently supporting themselves in the air. Then part of the head went, and the rest fell to the ground. But sheer momentum carried the green smoky vapor on, so that it surrounded first the old man, then several of the girls, and after them, Bradley himself. They were all yelling, all but Bradley, who put away his gun and muttered to himself in relief, and then the wind began to dissipate the vapor, and on the ground there was left only part of a head and six torn legs.

They were bowing to him and raising their voices high in thanks. It was easy, thought Bradley. Really, it was a cinch to be a god. The beasts that were such great dangers to them were mere trifles to him. To him, with a gun loaded with a thousand thermal charges each of which was capable of blasting armor plate. The thing wouldn't even have come close if he himself hadn't been such a timid, cowardly fool. Put Malevski in his place, and the detective would have got the creature as it came out of the trees. He wasn't Malevski.

It was a good thing for him that they couldn't know that. Now his position was completely secure. Now he could relax and enjoy his divine life.

He didn't realize that a much greater danger was yet to come. He found that out after the evening ceremony.

The group that came to see him this time was bigger than ever. Evidently, to honor him they had dropped all other work. Yanyoo seemed to have constituted himself Bradley's priest. He made a tremendously long and rhapsodic-sounding speech, but at the end there was no donation of the usual food and flowers. Instead, Yanyoo backed away, all the others doing the same, and looking at Bradley as if expecting him to follow them.

He followed. In this manner, with his worshippers walking respectfully backwards, they arrived at what seemed to Bradley to be an ordinary small hut. Outside the hut was what he took for a curiously shaped log of wood. The inside of the hut was in shadow, but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw something in one corner. It was a weird-looking head, also of wood.

It struck him then. The log of wood had been the old god, good enough to worship until he had come along and shown them what a god could really do. Now it had been contumaciously deposed and decapitated. The hut was a shrine. It was all his.

He had been promoted after all. The thought didn't please him in the least. Suppose he failed them too—and that was very possible, for he had no idea of what miracles they expected of him. Then he would be deposed and—at the thought, but he knew that he had to finish it—decapitated.

But for the moment there was no thought of deposing him. The gifts they offered were more lavish than ever. And in addition to the food and flowers, there was something new. A jug, filled with a warm, sweetish-smelling liquid. He could get the odor faintly through the intake valve of his helmet. Later on, when his worshippers were gone and he had his helmet off, he realized that it smelled up the entire hut.

It couldn't be harmful. Nothing that they had offered him so far was harmful. He took a sip—and sighed with content. This was one of the few things he had been lacking. There was alcohol, and there were flavors and essences that reminded him of the drinks he had encountered on a dozen planets. But this was first class stuff, not diluted or adulterated with the thousand and one synthetics that were put in to stretch a good thing as far as it could go.

Without realizing the danger, he downed the entire contents of the jug.

He felt good. He hadn't felt so good in years, not since his mother had made him a special cake for his birthday when he was—let me see now, was it eight or nine? No matter, it had been many years ago, and the occasion had been notable for the fact that she had let him drink some of the older people's punch, made with a tiny bit of some alcoholic drink. He felt very good. He picked up his helmet and put it on his head, and stuck the stem of a green flower rakishly through the exit valve of the helmet, so that the flower seemed to dance every time he exhaled, and staggered out of his hut.

He was fortunate that it was dark. "I'm drunk," he told himself. "Never been so drunk in my life. Never felt so good. Mother never felt so good. Malevski never felt so good."

He passed a shadowy figure in the dark and said, "Hiya, friend and worshipper. Ever see a god drunk before?"

The figure bowed, and kept its head lowered until he had moved on.

"Drunk or sober, I'm shtill divine," he said proudly. And he began to sing, loudly and impressively, his voice orchestral in his own ears within the confines of the helmet. "Ould Lang Shyne, she ain't what she ushed to be, ain't what she ushed to be—" The words came easily, and as it seemed, naturally to his lips.

After awhile, however, he tired of them. After awhile he found that his legs had tired of them. He sat down with a thump under a spiky tree and said solemnly, "Never felt so good in my life. Never felt so happy—it's a lie. I don't feel good."
He didn't, not any more. He felt sick to his stomach. A touch of sober thought had corroded the happiness of his intoxication, and he was sick and afraid. Today their god was a hero, today they would forgive him everything. But did they actually prefer a drunken god? No. Drunkenness made a god human, all too human. A drunken god was a weak god, and his hold on his worshippers was their belief in his strength. As he valued his life, he must get drunk no more.

"Ain't gonna get drunk no more, no more," he sang sadly and solemnly to himself, and finally he fell asleep.

He awoke with a hangover and a memory. He was not one of those men who when sober forget all they have done when drunk. He remembered everything. And he knew that he must put drunkenness away from him.

That morning they brought him only food and flowers. But at the evening ceremony they presented him once more with a jug of liquor as an additional reward for his destruction of the deadly beast. For the first time, Bradley took an active part in the ceremony. He held up the jug and said in grave tones, "In the name of Carrie Nation, I renounce thee and all thy works."

Then he poured out the liquor and smashed the jug on the ground.

After that, the smashing of the jug was part of the ceremony of worshipping him. It left him unhappy at first, but sober. After awhile, the unhappiness disappeared, but the soberness remained. From now on, he would act as a god should act.

The natives were not stupid, he saw that very clearly. The first jugs they had offered him had been beautiful objects, of excellent workmanship. But when they perceived that the only use he had for them was to break them, the quality deteriorated rapidly. Now the jugs they brought him were crude things indeed, made for the sole purpose of being smashed. He wondered how many other tribes had tricked their gods similarly.

No, they were not at all stupid. It struck him that with such advantages of civilization as he himself had enjoyed, they would have gone much further than he did. Two weeks or so after he had come down from the sky to be their god, he saw that they had learned from him. One of the young men appeared during the day wearing a wooden helmet. It was a helmet obviously patterned after his own, although it had no glass or plastic, and the openings in front of the eyes were left blank. The mythical Earth-hero, Prometheus, had brought fire down from the skies. He had brought the Helmet. He was Bradley, the Helmet-Bringer.

Even at that he had underestimated his worshippers. He had thought at first that the helmets were meant merely for ornament and decoration. He learned better one day when a swarm of creatures like flying lizards swept down out of a group of trees in a fierce attack. He had not known that such creatures existed here, and now that he saw them, he realized how fortunate it was that they were not more numerous. They had sharp teeth and sharper claws, and they tore at his head with a ferocity that struck fear into his heart. His gun was of less use than usual against them. He could catch one or two, but the others moved too swiftly for him to aim.

By this time, others of the natives wore wooden helmets, and he could see how the sharp claws ripped splinter after splinter from them. But the birds or lizards, or whatever they were, didn't go unscathed. From a sort of skin bellows, several of the natives blew a gray mist at them, and where the mist made contact with the leather skin, the flying creatures seemed to be paralyzed in mid-flight, and they fell to the ground, where they were easily crushed to death. By the time they had given up the fight and fled, half a dozen of them were lying dead.

They were evidently useless for food because of the poison they contained. He was surprised to see, however, that the natives still had a use for them. They dragged the dead creatures into a field of growing crops, and left them there to rot into fertilizer.

But such incidents as this, he found, were to be rare. For the most part, the life here was peaceful, and he found himself liking it more and more. Now, without laughter, he wondered again what his mother would have thought of him.

She would have been proud. He realized now that she had done her best for him. And when every one else had given up hope for him, she had not. Perhaps she had protected him too much—but she had early learned the need for protection. He could look at her now in a new light. Her own father had died early in life, and then her husband soon after her son had been born. She had faced a tough fight, and had thought to spare him what she herself had gone through. Too bad she hadn't realized exactly what she was doing. She was bringing him up with the ability, as the old epigram had it, to resist everything but temptation.

The temptation to steal that petty cash, to put his hands into a drunk's pocket and lift the man's wallet, to lie to a pretty girl, to slug a helpless victim—he had resisted none of them. He had resisted nothing until that day he had poured the jugful of liquor on the ground and smashed the jug itself.

But could he blame his mother for all that? It had all been his own fault.

And it would be his own fault if he failed to resist the new temptation that now reared its pretty head—Aoooya. She had taken to coming to his hut-shrine for a private little ceremony of her own. You might almost have thought that she had fallen in love with him as an individual. He wondered whether she had been impressed by his helmet.
Did she take that to be his actual head? No, of course not. They had made helmets for themselves, therefore they knew that the thing he wore was also a helmet. Perhaps they knew more about him than he thought.

But they continued to worship him, that was the main thing. And Aoooya brought him, every day, little presents, special flowers and food delicacies, that argued a personal affection.

This was a danger that he recognized from the beginning. Perhaps a god might fall in love with a mortal without losing his godliness. Perhaps. It had happened before. But, however the rest of the tribe might react to the idea, Bradley had noticed one young man who liked to stay near the girl, and he knew that this rival wouldn't take kindly to it at all. He might resent the god's behavior. And what happened when these people didn't like the way a god behaved? Why, they struck his head off.

The god might act first, of course. The young man wouldn't stand a chance against him if he used his gun. In fact, Bradley could blast the other man unobserved, make him disappear into vapor, without leaving any traces of how he died. That was murder, but if a god couldn't get away with murder, what sort of god was he? A pretty poor, cheap sort indeed. Yes, he could make his own rules.

And he could go on, maintaining his godhood by little murders of that sort, and other deadly miracles, until they hated him more than they loved him. That would follow inevitably. And then, when they all hated him, not even his gun would save him. Then—

"You're a liar," he told himself fiercely. "That isn't the thing you're afraid of. Your weakness is that you don't have a murderous nature. You could kill one or two of them and get away with it, and you'd be able to control yourself and kill no more. That time you hit the man over the head, you didn't intend to kill him either. You were more frightened, at first, anyway, by the thought that you might have killed him, than by the danger of being caught. You were overjoyed when he lived.

"You hate to kill, that's your trouble. You've had a sense of responsibility all along, but it never had a chance to develop. Now it's developed. You feel responsible for these people, for Aoooya and for the rest of them. That's why you can't take advantage of them. You've been posing as a rebel all your life, and you're just a respectable, law-abiding citizen at heart."

He winced at the thought. His own society had never accepted him at his own valuation. This one took him for a much greater being than he took himself, and there seemed to be nothing to do but to live up to what he was expected to be.

All the same, Aoooya continued to be a tempting morsel, and sooner or later, he feared, he would not be able to resist her. And then the planet itself provided a diversion.

They had never seen such a thing and had no idea of what it presaged, but he knew. He had heard of it on Earth and on Venus, and he had seen it on other planets where the rock formations had not yet settled down. A little hollow appeared first in the ground, and then the hollow was pushed out and suddenly blown into the air. Steam whistled through the newly made vent, a shower of steam and hot dust and red hot fragments of rock. Slowly the vent grew, until the cloud from the terrifying geyser darkened the sky and spread panic through the tribe.

He knew what would happen next. They were running around in terror, but not for one moment was he himself in doubt. He donned his complete space suit, in order to impress them the more, then stalked into the middle of them, and said,"Pick up all your possessions and follow me."

They stared at him, and he showed them what he meant by picking up the belongings of one household in his gloved hands, and handing them to a waiting woman. Then, when they had grasped the idea and were gathering all they owned, he led them toward the safety of the trees. Five minutes after they had set off, the lava began to flow from the new-born volcano, scorching the ground for a hundred yards around, sparks smoking and smoldering in the treetops.

The head start he had given them was enough to help them escape the resultant forest fire. All that day they traveled, until finally they came to a forest which couldn't burn, and here they rested. And here they settled down to build their lives anew.

It must have been a comfort to know that a god had led them to safety and was helping them make the new start. Bradley helped them with his gun, which blasted dangerous beasts, and even more with his slightly superior knowledge. He showed them how to fashion tools from stone and how to use these to build better huts. He taught them how to make swords and other weapons, so that henceforth they wouldn't be forced to rely for defense on poison alone. He was the most industrious god since Vulcan. And in helping them he found that he had no time for Aoooya.

Came the day when the new village settled down to its changed routine of life. The morning ceremony before his new shrine had just been completed, but Bradley was not satisfied. Something was wrong. Yanyoo's demeanor, Aoooya's—

With a shock, Bradley realized what it was. From old Yanyoo down the line, none of the natives seemed to
have their original fear of him. There was respect, there was affection, certainly, but the respect and affection were those due an older brother rather than a god.

And he was not displeased. Being a god had been a wearying business. Being a friend might be a great deal more pleasant. Yes, the change was something to be happy about.

But he had little time to be happy. For that same morning, there came what he had so long dreaded. Out of a clear, shipless sky, Malevski appeared, strolling toward him as casually as if he had been there all along, and said, "Nice little ceremony you have here."

"Hello, Malevski. Don't give me the credit. They thought it up."

"Ingenious. Almost as ingenious as the way they've used the help you gave them. We had this tribe listed long ago as a very capable one, far behind the rest of its System in development, it's true, but only because it had started late up the evolutionary ladder. It had been doing very nicely on its own, and we didn't want to interfere unless we could give it some real help.

"I'll admit that I had a few qualms at first, when we traced you here and learned that you had landed among them. But we've been observing you for the past day and a half—our space ship landed beyond that burned out stretch of ground, not too close to that volcano—and I'll have to admit that, judging from your past record, I didn't think you had it in you."

"I suppose that's over with now," said Bradley.

"Yes, you're finished with being a god. We don't believe in kidding the natives, Bradley!"

Bradley nodded ruefully. "They don't seem to believe in it, either. I guess they found out I wasn't a god before I did. But it didn't seem to matter to them."

Malevski shook his head firmly. "No, no time for that. I'll have to get out a full report, and we're in a hurry to get off. Any word you'd like to have sent out to your mother, Bradley, before we blast?"

Bradley looked back again, and his shoulders came up more firmly. He'd taught his people here, and led them; but he'd learned a few things himself—he'd found he could take what was necessary. He'd found that the easiest way wasn't always the best, that getting drunk was no way out, and that real friendship and respect meant more than the words of big-shots. Maybe he'd learned enough to be able to take regeneration...

He managed to grin, a little lopsidedly, at Malevski. "Yeah. You might send her a message. Tell her I'm fine, and that I've learned to wipe my own nose. I think she'll be glad to hear that."

"She will," Malevski told him. "When she hears that you're Provisional Governor of this planet, she'll even believe it."

"Provisional Governor?" Bradley stood with his mouth open, staring. He shook his head. "But what about regeneration...?"

Malevski laughed. "You're appointed, on the basis of my first report about what you're doing here, Bradley," he answered. "As to regeneration... well, you think about it, while we bring in the supplies we're supposed to leave for you, before we blast out of here."

He went off, chuckling, towards his ship, leaving Bradley to puzzle over it.

Then, just as Malevski disappeared, he understood. Damn it, they'd tricked him! They'd left him here where he had to be a god and assume the responsibilities of a god. And through that, he'd been regenerated—completely, thoroughly regenerated!

Suddenly, he was chuckling as hard as Malevski as he swung around and went back to face his former worshippers. And they were coming forward to meet him, their friendly smiles matching his own.

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**Contents**

FOUR MILES WITHIN
By Anthony Gilmore

CHAPTER I
The Monster of Metal

Far down into the earth goes a gleaming metal sphere whose passengers are deadly enemies

A strange spherical monster stood in the moonlight on the silent Mojave Desert. In the ghostly gray of the sand
and sage and joshua trees its metal hide glimmered dully—an amazing object to be found on that lonely spot. But there was only pride and anticipation in the eyes of the three people who stood a little way off, looking at it. For they had constructed the strange sphere, and were soon going to entrust their lives to it.

"Professor," said one of them, a young man with a cheerful face and a likable grin, "let's go down now! There's no use waiting till to-morrow. It's always dark down there, whether it's day or night up here. Everything is ready."

The white-haired Professor David Guinness smiled tolerantly at the speaker, his partner, Phil Holmes. "I'm kind of eager to be off, myself," he admitted. He turned to the third person in the little group, a dark-haired girl. "What do you say, Sue?"

"Oh, let's, Father!" came the quick reply. "We'd never be able to sleep to-night, anyway. As Phil says, everything is ready."

"Well, I guess that settles it," Professor Guinness said to the eager young man.

Phil Holmes' face went aglow with anticipation. "Good!" he cried. "Good! I'll skip over and get some water. It's barely possible that it'll be hot down there, in spite of your eloquent logic to the contrary!" And with the words he caught up a large jug standing nearby, waved his hand, said: "I'll be right back!" and set out for the water-hole, situated nearly a mile away from their little camp. The heavy hush of the desert night settled down once more after he left.

* * * * *

As his figure merged with the shadows in the distance, the elderly scientist murmured aloud to his daughter:

"You know, it's good to realize that my dream is about to become a reality. If it hadn't been for Phil.... Or no--I really ought to thank you, Sue. You're the one responsible for his participation!" And he smiled fondly at the slender girl by his side.

"Phil joined us just for the scientific interest, and for the thrill of going four miles down into the earth," she retorted at once, in spite of the blush her father saw on her face. But he did not insist. Once more he turned, as to a magnet, to the machine that was his handiwork.

The fifteen-foot sphere was an earth-borer—Guinness's own invention. In it he had utilized for the first time for boring purposes the newly developed atomic disintegrators. Many holes equally spaced over the sphere were the outlets for the dissolving ray—most of them on the bottom and alternating with them on the bottom and sides were the outlets of powerful rocket propulsion tubes, which would enable it to rise easily from the hole it would presently blast into the earth. A small, tight-fitting door gave entrance to the double-walled interior, where, in spite of the space taken up by batteries and mechanisms and an enclosed gyroscope for keeping the borer on an even keel, there was room for several people.

The earth-borer had been designed not so much for scientific investigation as the specific purpose of reaching a rich store of radium ore buried four miles below the Guinness desert camp. Many geologists and mining engineers knew that the radium was there, for their instruments had proven it often; but no one up to then knew how to get to it. David Guinness did—first. The borer had been constructed in his laboratory in San Francisco, then dismantled and freighted to the little desert town of Palmdale, from whence Holmes had brought the parts to their isolated camp by truck. Strict secrecy had been kept. Rather than risk assistants they had done all the work themselves.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes passed by, while the slight figure of the inventor puttered about the interior of the sphere, brightly lit by a detachable searchlight, inspecting all mechanisms in preparation for their descent. Sue stood by the door watching him, now and then turning to scan the desert for the returning Phil.

It was then, startlingly sudden, that there cracked through the velvet night the faint, distant sound of a gun. And it came from the direction of the water-hole.

Sue's face went white, and she trembled. Without a word her father stepped out of the borer and looked at her.

"That was a gun!" he said. "Phil didn't have one with him, did he?"

"No," Sue whispered. "And—why, there's nobody within miles of here!"

The two looked at each other with alarm and wonder. Then, from one of the broken patches of scrub that ringed the space in which the borer stood, came a mocking voice.

"Ah, you're mistaken, Sue," it affirmed. "But that was a gun."

David Guinness jerked around, as did his daughter. The man who had spoken stood only ten yards away, clearly outlined in the bright moonlight—a tall, well-built man, standing quite at ease, surveying them pleasantly. His smile did not change when old Guinness cried:

"Quade! James Quade!"

The man nodded and came slowly forward. He might have been considered handsome, had it not been for his thin, mocking lips and a swarthy complexion.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Guinness angrily. "And what do you mean—itis a gun? Have you—"
"Easy, easy--one thing at a time," said Quade, still smiling. "About the gun--well, your young friend Holmes said, he'd be right back, but I--I'm afraid he won't be."

Sue Guinness's lips formed a frightened word:
"Why?"
Quade made a short movement with his left hand, as is brushing the query aside. "Let's talk about something more pleasant," he said, and looked back at the professor. "The radium, and your borer, for instance. I hear you're all ready to go down."

David Guinness gasped. "How did you know--?" he began, but a surge of anger choked him, and his fists clenched. He stepped forward. But something came to life in James Quade's right hand and pointed menacingly at him. It was the stubby black shape of an automatic.

"Keep back, you old fool!" Quade said harshly. "I don't want to have to shoot you!"

Unwillingly, Guinness came to a stop. "What have you done with young Holmes?" he demanded.

"Never mind about him now," said Quade, smiling again. "Perhaps I'll explain later. At the moment there's something much more interesting to do. Possibly you'll be surprised to hear it, but we're all going to take a little ride in this machine of yours, Professor. Down. About four miles. I'll have to ask you to do the driving. You will, won't you--without making a fuss?"

Guinness's face worked furiously. "Why, you're crazy, Quade!" he sputtered. "I certainly won't!"

"No?" asked Quade softly. The automatic he held veered around, till it was pointing directly at the girl. "I wouldn't want to have to shoot Sue--say--through the hand...." His finger tightened perceptibly on the trigger.

"You're mad, man!" Guinness burst out. "You're crazy! What's the idea--"

"In due time I'll tell you. But now I'll ask you just once more," Quade persisted. "Will you enter that borer, or must I--" He broke off with an expressive shrug.

David Guinness was powerless. He had not the slightest idea what Quade might be about; the one thought that broke through his fear and anger was that the man was mad, and had better be humored. He trembled, and a tight sensation came to his throat at sight of the steady gun trained on his daughter. He dared not trifle.

"I'll do it," he said.

James Quade laughed. "That's better. You always were essentially reasonable, though somewhat impulsive for a man of your age. The rash way you severed our partnership, for instance.... But enough of that. I think we'd better leave immediately. Into the sphere, please. You first, Miss Guinness."

"Must she come?"

"I'm afraid so. I can't very well leave her here all unprotected, can I?"

Quade's voice was soft and suave, but an undercurrent of sarcasm ran through it. Guinness winced under it; his whole body was trembling with suppressed rage and indignation. As he stepped to the door of the earth-borer he turned and asked:

"How did you know our plans? About the radium--the borer?"

Quade told him. "Have you forgotten," he said, "that you talked the matter over with me before we split last year? I simply had the laboratory watched, and when you got new financial backing from young Holmes, and came here. I followed you. Simple, eh?... Well, enough of this. Get inside. You first, Sue."

Trembling, the girl obeyed, and when her father hesitated Quade jammed his gun viciously into his ribs and pushed him to the door. "Inside!" he hissed, and reluctantly, hatred in his eyes, the professor stepped into the control compartment after Sue. Quade gave a last quick glance around and, with gun ever wary, passed inside. The door slammed shut: there was a click as its lock shot over. The sphere was a sealed ball of metal.

Inside, David Guinness obeyed the automatic's imperious gesture and pulled a shiny-handled lever slowly back, and the hush that rested over the Mojave was shattered by a tremendous bellow, a roar that shook the very earth. It was the disintegrating blast, hurled out of the bottom in many fan-shaped rays. The coarse gray sand beneath the machine stirred and flew wildly; the sphere vibrated madly; and then the thunder lowered in tone to a mighty humming and the earth-borer began to drop. Slowly it fell, at first, then more rapidly. The shiny top came level with the ground: disappeared; and in a moment there was nothing left but a gaping hole where a short while before a round monster of metal had stood. The hole was hot and dark, and from it came a steadily diminishing thunder.

For a long time no one in the earth-borer spoke--didn't even try to--for though the thunder of the disintegrators was muted, inside, to a steady drone, conversation was almost impossible. The three were crowded quite close in the spherical inner control compartment. Sue sat on a little collapsible stool by the bowed, but by no means subdued, figure of Professor David Guinness, while Quade sat on the wire guard of the gyroscope, which was in the exact
The depth gauge showed two hundred feet. Already the three people were numb from the vibration; they hardly felt any sensation at all, save one of great weight pressing inwards. The compartment was fairly cool and the air good--kept so by the automatic air rectifiers and the insulation, which shut out the heat born of their passage.

Quade had been carefully watching Guinness's manipulation of the controls, when he was struck by a thought. At once he stood up, and shouted in the elderly inventor's ear: "Try the rockets! I want to be sure this thing will go back up!"

Without a word Guinness shoved back the lever controlling the disintegrators, at the same time whirling a small wheel full over. The thudding drone died away to a whisper, and was replaced by sharper thundering, as the stream of the propulsion rockets beneath the sphere was released. A delicate needle trembled on a gauge, danced at the figure two hundred, then crept back to one-ninety ... one-sixty ... one-forty.... Quade's eyes took in everything.

"Excellent, Guinness!" he yelled. "Now--down once more!"

The rockets were slowly cut; the borer jarred at the bottom of its hole; again the disintegrators droned out. The sphere dug rapidly into the warm ground, biting lower and lower. At ten miles an hour it blasted a path to depths hitherto unattainable to man, sweeping away rock and gravel and sand--everything that stood in its way. The depth gauge rose to two thousand, then steadily to three and four. So it went on for nearly half an hour.

At the end of that time, at a depth of nearly four miles, Quade got stiffly to his feet and once more shouted into the professor's ear.

"We ought to be close to that radium, now," he said. "I think--"

But his words stopped short. The floor of the sphere suddenly fell away from their feet, and they felt themselves tumbled into a wild plunge. The drone of the disintegrators, hitherto muffled by the earth they bit into, rose to a hollow scream. Before the professor quite knew what was happening, there was a stunning crash, a shriek of tortured metal--and the earth-borer rocked and lay still....

* * * * *

The whole world seemed to be filled with thunder when David Guinness came back to consciousness. He opened his eyes and stared up into a darkness to which it took him some time to accustom himself. When he did, he made out hazily that he was lying on the floor of a vast dark cavern. He could dimly see its jagged roof, perhaps fifty feet above. There was the strong smell of damp earth in his nostrils; his head was splitting from the steady drone in his ear-drums. Suddenly he remembered what had happened. He groaned slightly and tried to sit up.

But he could not. His arms and legs were tied. Someone had removed him from the earth-borer and bound him on the floor of the cavern they had plunged into.

David Guinness strained at the rope. It was futile, but in doing so he twisted his head around and saw another form, similarly tied, lying close to him. He gave a little cry of relief. It was Sue. And she was conscious, her eyes on his face.

She spoke to him, but he could not understand her for the drone in his ears, and when he spoke to her it was the same. But the professor did not just then continue his effort to converse with her. His attention was drawn to the borer, now dimly illuminated by its portable light, which had been secured to the door. It was right side up, and appeared to be undamaged. The broad ray of the searchlight fell far away on one of the cavern's rough walls. He could just make out James Quade standing there, his back towards them.

He was hacking at the wall with a pick. Presently he dropped the tool and wrenched at the rock with bare hands. A large chunk came loose. He hugged it to him and turned and strode back towards the two on the floor, and as he drew near they could plainly see a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"You know what this is?" he shouted. Guinness could only faintly hear him. "Wealth! Millions! Of course we always knew the radium was here, but this is the proof. And now we've a way of getting it out--thanks to your borer! All the credit is yours, Professor Guinness! You shall have the credit, and I'll have the money."

Guinness tugged furiously at his bonds again. "You--you--" he gasped. "How dare you tie us this way! Release us at once! What do you mean by it?"

* * * * *

Quade smiled unpleasantly. "You're very stupid, Guinness. Haven't you guessed by now what I'm going to do?"

He paused, as if waiting for an answer, and the smile on his face gave way to a look of savage menace. For the first time his bitter feelings came to the surface.

"Have you forgotten how close I came to going to jail over those charges of yours a year ago?" he said. "Have you forgotten the disgrace to me that followed?--the stigma that forced me to disappear for months? You fool, do you think I've forgotten?--or that I'd let you--"

"Quade," interrupted the older man, "you know very well you were guilty. I caught you red-handed. You didn't fool anyone--except the jury that let you go. So save your breath, and, if you've the sense you were born with,
release my daughter and me. Why, you're crazy!" he cried with mounting anger. "You can't get away with this! I'll
have you in jail within forty-eight hours, once I get back to the surface!"
With an effort Quade controlled his feelings and assumed his oily, sarcastic manner. "That's just it," he said:
"'once you get back!' How stupid you are! You don't seem to realize that you're not going back to the surface. You
and your daughter."
Sue gasped, and her father's eyes went wide. There was a tense silence.
"You wouldn't dare!" the inventor cried finally. "You wouldn't dare!"
"It's rather large, this cavern," Quade went on. "You'll have plenty of room. Perhaps I'll untie you before I go
back up, so--"
"You can't get away with it!" shouted the old man, tremendously excited. "Why, you can't, possibly! Philip
Holmes'll track you down--he'll tell the police--he'll rescue us! And then--"
Quade smiled suavely. "Oh, no, he won't. Perhaps you remember the shot that sounded from the water-hole?
Well, when I and my assistant, Juan, heard Holmes say he was going for water, I told Juan to follow him to the
water-hole and bind him, to keep him from interfering till I got back up. But Mr. Holmes is evidently of an
impulsive disposition, and must have caused trouble. Juan, too, is impulsive; he is a Mexican. And he had a gun. I'm
afraid he was forced to use it.... I am quite sure Philip Holmes will not, as you say, track me down."
David Guinness looked at his daughter's white face and horror-filled eyes and suddenly crumpled. Humbly,
passionately, he begged Quade to take her back up. "Why, she's never done anything to you, Quade!" he pleaded.
"You can't take her life like that! Please! Leave me, if you must, but not her! You can't--"
*****
But suddenly the old man noticed that Quade was not listening. His head was tilted to one side as if he was
straining to hear something else. Guinness was held silent for a moment by the puzzled look on the other's face and
the strange way he was acting.
"Do you hear it?" Quade asked at last; and without waiting for an answer, he knelt down and put his ear to the
ground. When he rose his face was savage, and he cursed under his breath.
"Why, it's a humming!" muttered Professor Guinness. "And it's getting louder!"
"It sounds like another borer!" ventured Sue.
The humming grew in volume. Then, from the ceiling, a rock dropped. They were looking at the cavern roof
and saw it start, but they did not hear it strike, for the ever-growing humming echoed loudly through the cavern.
They saw another rock fall; and another.
"For God's sake, what is it?" cried Guinness.
Quade looked at him and slowly drew out his automatic.
"Another earth-borer, I think," he answered. "And I rather expect it contains your young friend Mr. Holmes.
Yes--coming to rescue you."
For a moment Guinness and his daughter were too astounded to do anything but gape. She finally exclaimed:
"But--but then Phil's alive?"
James Quade smiled. "Probably--for the moment. But don't let your hopes rise too high. The borer he's in isn't
strong enough to survive a fifty-foot plunge." He was shouting now, so loud was the thunder from above. "And," he
added, "I'm afraid he's not strong enough to survive it, either!"
CHAPTER II
The Man-Hunt
When Phil Holmes started off to the water-hole, his head was full of the earth-borer and the imminent descent.
Now that the long-awaited time had come, he was at fever-pitch to be off, and it did not take him long to cover the
mile of sandy waste. His thoughts were far inside the earth as he dipped the jug into the clear cool water and sloshed
it full.
So the rope that snaked softly through the air and dropped in a loop over his shoulders came as a stark surprise.
Before he knew what was happening it had slithered down over his arms and drawn taut just above the elbows, and
he was yanked powerfully backwards and almost fell.
But he managed to keep his feet as he staggered backward, and turning his head he saw the small dark figure of
his aggressor some fifteen feet away, keeping tight the slack.
Phil's surprise turned to sudden fury and he completely lost his head. What he did was rash; mad; and yet, as it
turned out, it was the only thing that could have saved him. Instinctively, without hesitating one second, and
absolutely ignoring an excited command to stand still, he squirmed face-on to his aggressor, lowered his head and
charged.
The distance was short. Halfway across it, a gun barked, and he heard the bullet crack into the water jug, which
he was still holding in front of himself. And even before the splintered fragments reached the ground he had crashed


into the firer.

He hit him with all the force of a tackling lineman, and they both went down. The man grunted as the wind was jarred out of him, but he wriggled like an eel and managed to worm aside and bring up his gun.

Then there was a desperate flurry of bodies in the coarse sand. Holmes dived frantically for the gun hand and caught it; but, handicapped as he was by the rope, he could not hold it. Slowly its muzzle bent upward to firing position.

Desperately, he wrenched the arm upwards, in the direction it had been straining to go, and the sudden unexpected jerk doubled the man's arm and brought the weapon across his chest. For a moment there was a test of strength as Phil lay chest to chest over his opponent, the gun blocked between. Then the other grunted; squirmed violently—and there was a muffled explosion.

A cry of pain cut the midnight air, and with insane strength Holmes' ambusher fought free from his grip, staggered to his feet and went reeling away. Phil tore loose from the rope and bounded after him, never feeling, at the moment, his powder-burned chest.

And then he halted in his tracks.

A great roar came thundering over the desert!

* * * * *

At once he knew that it came from the earth-borer's disintegrators. The sphere had started down without him. He stood stock still, petrified with surprise, facing the sound, while his attacker melted farther and farther into the night. And then, suddenly, Phil Holmes was sprinting desperately back towards the Guinness camp.

He ran until he was exhausted; walked for a little while his legs gathered more strength, and his laboring lungs more air; and then ran again. As the minutes passed, the thundrette lessened rapidly into a muffled drone; and by the time Phil had panted up to the brink of the hole that gaped where but a little time before the sphere was standing, it had become but a distant purr. He leaned far over and peered into the hot blackness below, but could see nothing.

Phil kneeled there silently for some minutes, shocked by his strange attack, bewildered by the unexpected descent of the borer. For a time his mind would not work; he had no idea what to do. But gradually his thoughts came to order and made certain things clear.

He had been deliberately ambushed. Only by luck had he escaped, he told himself. If it hadn't been for the water jug, he'd now be out of the picture. And on the heels of the ambush had came the surprising descent of the earth-borer. The two incidents coincided too well: the same mind had planned them. And two, men, at least, were in on the plot.... It suddenly became very clear to him that the answer to the puzzle lay with the man who had ambushed him. He would have to get that man. Track him down.

Phil acted with decision. He got to his feet and strode rapidly to the deserted Guinness shack, horribly quiet and lonely now in the bright moonlight. In a minute he emerged with a flashlight at his belt and a rifle across his arm.

Once again he went over to the new black hole in the desert and looked down. From far below still came the purr, now fainter than ever. His friend, the girl he loved, were down there, he reflected bitterly, and he was helpless to reach them. Well, there was one thing he could do--go man-hunting. Turning, he started off at a long lope for the water-hole.

* * * * *

Ten minutes later he was there, and off to the side he found the marks of their scuffle—and small black blotches that could be nothing but blood. The other was wounded: could probably not get far. But he might still have his gun, so Phil kept his rifle handy, and tempered his impatience with caution as he set out on the trail of the widely spaced footprints.

They led off towards the nearby hills, and in the bright moonlight Phil did not use his flashlight at all, except to investigate other round black blotches that made a line parallel to the prints. As he went on he found his quarry's steps coming more closely together: becoming erratic. Soon they showed as painful drags in the sand, a laborious hauling of one foot after the other.... Phil put away his light and advanced very cautiously.

He wondered, as he went, who in the devil was behind it all. The radium-finding project had been kept strictly secret. Not another soul was supposed to know of the earth-borer and its daring mission into the heart of the earth. Yet, obviously, someone had found out, and whoever it was had laid at least part of his scheme cunningly. An old man and a girl cannot offer much resistance: he, Phil, would have been well taken care of had it not been for the water jug. So far, there were at least two in the plot: the man who had ambushed him and the unknown who had evidently kidnapped both Professor and Sue Guinness. But there might be still more.

There might be friends, nearby, of the man he was tracking. The fellow might have reached them, and warned them that the scheme hadn't gone through, that Phil was loose. They could very easily conceal themselves alongside their partner's tracks and train their rifles on the tracker....

The trail was leading up into one of the cañons in the cluster of hills to the west. For some distance he followed
it up through a slash of black below the steep moonlit heights of the hills to each side—and then, suddenly, he vaguely made out the forms of two huts just ahead.

Immediately he stooped low, and went skirting widely off up one side. He proceeded slowly, with great caution, his rifle at the ready. At any moment, he knew, the hush might be split by the cracks of waylaying guns. Warnily he advanced along the narrow cañon wall above the huts. No lights were lit, and the place seemed unoccupied. He was debating what to do next when his attention was attracted to a large dark object lying in the cañon trail some twenty yards from the nearest hut. Straining his eyes in the inadequate moonlight, he saw that it was the outstretched figure of a man. His quarry—his ambusher!

* * * * *

Phil dropped flat, fearful of being seen. Keeping as best he could in the shadows, fearing every moment to hear the sharp bark of a gun, he crawled forward. It took him a long time to approach the sprawled figure, but he wasn't taking chances. When within twenty feet, he rose suddenly and darted forward to the man's side.

His rapid glance showed him that the fellow was completely out: and another quick look around failed to show that anyone else was watching, so he returned to his examination of the man. It was the ambusher, all right: a Mexican. He was still breathing, though his face was drawn and white from the loss of blood from a wound under the blood-soaked clothing near his upper right arm. A hasty search showed that he no longer had his gun, so Phil, satisfied that he was powerless for some time to come, cautiously wormed his way towards the two shacks.

There was something sinister in the strange silence that hung over them. One was of queer construction—a windowless, square, high box of galvanized iron. The other was obviously a dwelling place. Carefully Phil sneaked up to the latter. Then, rifle ready, he pushed its door open and sent a beam of light stabbing through the darkness of the interior.

There was no one there. Only two bunks, a table, chair, a pail of water and some cooking utensils met his view. He crept out toward the other building.

Come close, Phil found that a dun-colored canvas had been thrown over the top of it, making an adequate camouflage in daytime. The place was about twenty feet high. He prowled around the metal walls and discovered a rickety door. Again, gun ready, he flung it open. The beam from his flash speared a path through the blackness—and he gasped at sight of what stood revealed.

There, inside, was a long, bullet-like tube of metal, the pointed end upper-most, and the bottom, which was flat, toward the ground. It was held in a wooden cradle, and was slanted at the floor. In the bottom were holes of two shapes—rocket tubes and disintegrating projectors. It was another earth-borer.

* * * * *

Phil stood frozen with surprise before this totally unlooked-for machine. He could easily have been overcome, had the owner been in the building, for he had forgotten everything but what his eyes were staring at. He started slowly around the borer, found a long narrow door slightly ajar, and stepped inside.

This borer, like Guinness's, had a double shell, and much the same instruments, though the whole job was simpler and cruder. A small instrument board contained inclination, temperature, depth and air-purity indicators, and narrow tubes led to the air rectifiers. But what kept Holmes' attention were the wires running from the magneto to the mixing chambers of the disintegrating tubes.

"The fools!" he exclaimed, "—they didn't know how to wire the thing! Or else," he added after a moment, "didn't get around to doing it." He noticed that the projectile's interior contained no gyroscope: though, he thought, none would be needed, for the machine, being long and narrow, could not change keel while in the ground. Here he was reminded of something. Stepping outside, he estimated the angle the borer made with the dirt floor. Twenty degrees. "And pointed southwest!" he exclaimed aloud. "This borer would come close to meeting the professor's, four miles under our camp!"

* * * * *

At once he knew what he would do. First he went back to the other shack and got the pail of water he had noticed, and took this out where the Mexican lay outstretched. He bathed the man's face and the still slightly bleeding bullet wound in his shoulder.

Presently the wounded man came to. His eyes opened, and he stared up into a steel mask of a face, in which two level black eyes bored into his. He remembered that face—remembered it all too well. He trembled, cowered away.

"No!" he gasped, as if he had seen a ghost. "No—no!"
"Yes, I'm the man," Holmes told him firmly, menacingly. "The same one you tried to ambush." He paused a moment, then said: "Do you want to live?"

It was a simple question, frightening in its simplicity.
"Because if you don't answer my questions, I'm going to let you lie here," Phil went on coldly. "And that would
probably mean your death. If you do answer, I'll fix you up so you can have a chance."

The Mexican nodded eagerly. "I talk," he said.

"Good," said Phil. "Then tell me who built that machine?"

"Señor Quade. Señor James Quade."

"Quade!" Phil had heard the name before. "Of course!" he said. "Guinness's old partner!"

"I not know," the Mexican answered. "He hire me with much money. He buy thees machine inside, and we put
him together. But he could no make him work--it take too long. We watch, hear old man go down to-night, and--"

* * * * *

The greaser stopped. "And so he sent you to get me, while he kidnapped the old man and his daughter and
forced them under the ground in their own borer," Holmes supplied, and the other nodded.

"But I only mean to tie you!" he blurted, gesturing weakly. "I no mean shoot! No, no--"

"All right--forget it," Phil interrupted. "And now tell me what Quade expects to do down there."

"I not know, Señor," came the hesitant reply, "but...."

"But what?" the young man jerked. Reluctantly the wounded Mexican continued. "Señor Quade--he--I think he don' like thees old man. I think he leave heem an' the girl down below. Then he come up an' say they keeled going down."

Phil nodded grimly. "I see," he said, voicing his thoughts. "Then he would say that he and Professor Guinness
are still partners--and the radium ore will belong to him. Very nice. Very nice...."

He snapped back to action, and without another word hoisted the Mexican onto his back and carried him into
the shack. There he cleansed the wound, rigged up a tight bandage for it, and tied the man to one of the cots. He tied
him in such a fashion that he could reach some food and water he put by the cot.

"You leave me like thees?" the Mexican asked.

"Yes," Phil said, and started for the door.

"But what you going to do?"

Phil smiled grimly as he flung an answer back over his shoulder.

"Me?--I'm going to fix the wiring on those disintegrators in your friend Quade's borer. Then I'm starting down
after him." He stopped and turned before he closed the door. "And if I don't get back--well, it's just too bad for you!"

* * * * *

And so, a little later, once more the hushed desert night was cleft by a furious bellow of sound. It came, this
time, from a narrow cañon. The steep sides threw the roar back and back again, and the echoes swelled to an earth-
shaking blast of sound. The oblong hut from which it came rocked and almost fell; then, as the noise began to
lessen, teetered on its foundations and half-slipped into the ragged hole that had been bored inside.

The descent was a nightmare that Holmes would never forget. Quade's machine was much cruder and less
efficient than the sphere David Guinness had designed. Its protecting insulation proved quite inadequate, and the
heat rapidly grew terrific as the borer dug down. Phil became faint, stifled, and his body oozed streams of sweat.
And the descent was also bumpy and uneven; often he was forced to leave the controls and work on the mechanism
of the disintegrators when they faltered and threatened to stop. But in spite of everything the needle on the depth
gauge gradually swung over to three thousand, and four, and five....

After the first mile Holmes improvised a way to change the air more rapidly, and it grew a little cooler. He
watched the story the depth gauge told with narrowed eyes, and, as it reached three miles, inspected his rifle. At
three and a half miles he stopped the borer, thinking to try to hear the noise made by the other, but so paralyzed were
his ear-drums from the terrific thunder beneath, it seemed hardly any quieter when it ceased.

His plans were vague; they would have to be made according to the conditions he found. There was a coil of
rope in the tube-like interior of the borer, and he hoped to find a cavern or cleft in the earth for lateral exploring. He
would stop at a depth of four miles--where he should be very near the path of the professor's sphere.

But Phil never saw the needle on the gauge rise to four miles. At three and three quarters came sudden
catastrophe.

He knew only that there was an awful moment of utter helplessness, when the borer swooped wildly
downwards, and the floor was snatched sickeningly from under him. He was thrown violently against the instrument
panel; then up toward the pointed top; and at the same instant came a rending crash that drove his senses from him....

CHAPTER III

"You Haven't the Guts"

"Just as I thought," said James Quade in the silence that fell when the last echoes had died away, and the
splinters of steel and rock had settled. "You see, Professor, this earth-borer belongs to me. Yes, I built one too. But I
couldn't, unfortunately, get it working properly--that is, in time to get down here first. After all, I'm not a scientist,
and remembered little enough of your borer's plans.... It's probably young Holmes who's dropped in on us. Shall we
David Guinness and his daughter were speechless with dread. Quade had trained the searchlight on the borer, and by turning their heads they could see it plainly. It was all too clear that the machine was a total wreck. It had pitched over onto one side, its shell cracked and mangled irreparably. Grotesque pieces of crumpled metal lay all around it. Its slanting course had tumbled it within fifteen yards of the sphere.

In silence the old man and the girl watched Quade walk deliberately over to it, his automatic steady in his right hand. He wrenched at the long, narrow door, but it was so badly bent that for a while he could not get it open. At last it swung out, however, and Quade peered inside.

After a moment he reached in and drew out a rifle. He took it over to a nearby rock, smashed the gun's breech, then flung it, useless, aside. Returning to the borer, he again peered in.

Sue was about to scream from the torturous suspense when he at last straightened up and looked around at the white-faced girl and her father.

"Mr. Holmes is tougher than I'd thought possible," he said, with a thin smile; "he's still alive." And, as Sue gasped with relief, he added: "Would you like to see him?"

He dragged the young man's unconscious body roughly out on the floor. There were several bad bruises on his face and head, but otherwise he was apparently uninjured. As Quade stood over him, playing idly with the automatic, he stirred, and blinked, and at last, with an effort, got up on one elbow and looked straight at the thin lips and narrowed eyes of the man standing above. He shook his head, trying to comprehend, then muttered hazily:

"You--you're--Quade?"

Quade did not have time to answer, for Sue Guinness cried out:

"Phil! Are you all right?"

Phil stared stupidly around, caught sight of the two who lay bound on the floor, and staggered to his feet. "Sue!" he cried, relief and understanding flooding his voice. He started towards her.

"Stand where you are!" Quade snapped harshly, and the automatic in his hand came up. Holmes peered at it and stopped, but his blood-streaked face settled into tight lines, and his body tensed.

"You'd better," continued Quade. "Now tell me what happened to Juan."

Phil forced himself to be calm. "Your pal, the greaser?" he said cuttingly. "He shot himself, playing with a gun."

Quade chose not to notice the way Phil said this, but a little of the suave self-confidence was gone from his face as he said: "Well, in that case I'll have to hurry back to the surface to attend to him. But don't be alarmed," he added, more brightly. "I'll be back for you all in an hour or so."

At this, David Guinness struggled frantically with his bonds and yelled:

"Don't believe him, Phil! He's going to leave us here, to starve and die! He told us so just before you came down!"

Quade's face twitched perceptibly. His eyes were nervous.

"Is that true, Quade?" Holmes asked. There was a steely note in his voice.

"Why--no, of course not," the other said hastily, uncertain whether to lie or not. "Of course I didn't!"

Phil Holmes looked square into his eyes. He bluffed.

"You couldn't desert us, Quade. You haven't the guts. You haven't the guts."

His face and eyes burned with the contempt that was in his words. It cut Quade to the raw. But he could not avoid Phil's eyes. He stared at them for a full moment, trembling slightly. Slowly, by inches, he started to back toward the sphere; then suddenly he ran for it with all his might, Holmes after him. Quade got to it first, and inside, as he yanked in the searchlight and slammed and locked the door, he yelled:

"You'll see, you damned pup! You'll see!" And there was the smothered sound of half-maniacal laughter....

Phil threw all his weight against the metal door, but it was hopeless and he knew it. He had gathered himself for another rush when he heard Guinness yell:

"Back, Phil--back! He'll turn on the side disintegrators!"

Mad with rage as the young man was, he at once saw the danger and leaped away--only to almost fall over the professor's prone body. With hurrying, trembling fingers he untied the pair's bonds, and they struggled to their feet, cramped and stiff. Then it was Phil who warned them.

"Back as far as you can! Hurry!" He grabbed Sue's hand and plunged toward the uncertain protection of a huge rock far in the rear. At once he made them lie flat on the ground.

As yet the sphere had not stirred nor emitted a whisper of sound, though they knew the man inside was conning
the controls in a fever of haste to leave the cavern. But they hadn't long to wait. There came a sputter, a starting
cough from the rocket tubes beneath the sphere. Quickly they warmed into life, and the dully glimmering ball
rocked in the hole it lay in. Then a cataract of noise unleashed itself; a devastating thunder roared through the
echoing cavern as the rockets burst into full force. A wave of brilliant orange-red splashed out from under the
sphere, licked back up its sides, and seemed literally to shove the great ball up towards the hole in the ceiling.

Its ascent was very slow. As it gained height it looked--save for its speed--like a fantastic meteor flaming
through the night, for the orange plumage that streamed from beneath lit the ball with dazzling color. A glowing
sphere, it staggered midway between floor and ceiling, creeping jerkily upwards.

"He's not going to hit the hole!" shouted Guinness.

The borer had not risen in a perfectly straight line; it jarred against the rim of the hole, and wavered uncertainly.
Every second the roar of its rockets, swollen by echoes, rose in a savage crescendo; the faces of the three who
watched were painted orange in the glow.

The sphere was blind. The man inside could judge his course only by the feel. As the three who were deserted
watched, hoping ardently that Quade would not be able to find the opening, the left side-rockets spouted lances of
fire, and they knew he had discovered the way to maneuver the borer laterally. The new flames welded with the
exhaust of the main tubes into a great fan-shaped tail, so brilliant and shot through with other colors that their eyes
could not stand the sight, except in winks. The borer jerked to the right, but still it could not find the hole. Then the
flames lessened for a moment, and the borer sank down, to rise again a moment later. Its ascent was so labored that
Phil shouted to Professor Guinness:

"Why so slow?"
And the inventor told him that which he had not seen for the intolerable light.
"Only half his rockets are on!"

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This time the sphere was correctly aimed, however, and it roared straight into the hole. Immediately the fierce
sound of the exhaust was muffled, and in a few seconds only the fiery plumage, shooting down from the ceiling,
showed where the machine was. Then this disappeared, and the noise alone was left.

Phil leaped forward, intending to stare up, but Guinness's yell halted him.
"Not yet! He might still use the disintegrators!"

For many minutes they waited, till the muffled exhaust had died to a drone. There was a puzzled expression on
the professor's face as the three at last walked over and dared peer up into the hole. Far above, the splash of orange
lit the walls of the tunnel.

"That's funny!" the old man muttered. "He's only using half the rockets--about ten. I thought he'd turn them all
on when he got into the hole, but he didn't. Either they were damaged in the fall, or Quade doesn't see fit to use
them."

"Half of them are enough," said Phil bitterly, and put his arm around the quiet girl standing next to him.
Together, a silent little group, they watched the spot of orange die to a pin-point; watched it waver, twinkle, ever
growing smaller.... And then it was gone.

Gone! Back to the surface of the earth, to the normal world of reality. Only four miles above them--a small
enough distance on the surface itself--and yet it might have been a million miles, so utterly were they barred from
it....

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The same thought was in their minds, though none of them dared express it. They were thinking of the serene
desert, and the cool wind, and the buttes and the high hills, placid in the moonlight. Of the hushed rise of the dawn,
the first flush of the sun that was so achingly lovely on the desert. The sun they would never see again, buried in a
lifeless world of gloom four miles within.... And buried alive--and not alive for long....

But that way lay madness. Phil Holmes drove the horrible thoughts from his brain and forced a smile to his
face.

"Well, that's that!" he said in a voice meant to be cheerful.

The dim cavern echoed his words mockingly. With the earth-borer gone--the man-made machine that had dared
break a solitude undisturbed since the earth first cooled--the great cavern seemed to return to its awful original
mood. The three dwarfed humans became wholly conscious of it. They felt it almost a living thing, stretching vastly
around them, tightening its unheard spell on them. Its smell, of mouldy earth and rocks down which water slowly
dripped, filled their nostrils and somehow added to their fear.

As they looked about, their eyes became accustomed to the dim, eery, phosphorescent illumination. They saw
little worm-like creatures now and again appear from tiny holes between stalagmites in the jagged floor; and, as Phil
wondered in his mind how long it would be before they would be reduced to using them for food, a strange mole-
sized animal scraped from the darkness and pecked at one of them. As it slithered away, a writhing shape in its mouth, Holmes muttered bitterly: "A competitor!" Vague, flitting forms haunted the gloom among the stalactites of the distorted ceiling--hints of the things that lived in the terrible silence of this nether world. Here Time had paused, and life had halted in primate form.

A little moan came from Sue Guinness's pale lips. She plucked at her arm; a sickly white worm, only an inch long, had fallen on it from the ceiling. "Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

Phil drew her closer to him, and walked with her over to Quade's wrecked borer. "Let's see what we've got here," he suggested cheerfully.

The machine was over on its side, the metal mangled and crushed beyond repair. Nevertheless, he squeezed into it. "Stand back!" he warned. "I'm going to try its rockets!" There was a click of broken machinery, and that was all. "Rockets gone," Phil muttered.

He pulled another lever over. There was a sputter from within the borer, then a furious roar that sent great echoes beating through the cavern. A cloud of dust reared up before the bottom of the machine, whipped madly for a moment, and sank as the bellow of sound died down. Sue saw that a rocky rise in the floor directly in front of the disintegrators had been planed off levelly.

Phil scrambled out. "The disintegrators work," he said, "but a lot of good they do us. The borer's hopelessly cracked." He shrugged his shoulders, and with a discouraged gesture cast to the ground a coil of rope he had found inside.

Then suddenly he swung around. "Professor!" he called to the old figure standing bowed beneath the hole in the ceiling. "There's a draft blowing from somewhere! Do you feel it?"

Guinness felt with his hands a moment and nodded slowly. "Yes," he said.

"It's coming from this way!" Sue said excitedly, pointing into the darkness on one side of the cavern. "And it goes up the hole we made in the ceiling!"

Phil turned eagerly to the old inventor. "It must come from somewhere," he said, "and that somewhere may take us toward the surface. Let's follow it!"

"We might as well," the other agreed wearily. His was the tone of a man who has only a certain time to live.

But Phil was more eager. "While there's life, there's hope," he said cheerfully. "Come on, Sue, Professor!" And he led the way forward toward the dim, distorted rock shapes in the distance.

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The roof and sides of the cavern angled down into a rough, tunnel-like opening, from which the draft swept. It was a heavy air, weighted with the smell of moist earth and lifeless water and a nameless, flat, stale gas. They slowly made their way through the impeding stalagmites, surrounded by a dark blur of shadows, the ghostly phosphorescent light illuminating well only the few rods around them. Utter silence brooded over the tunnel.

Phil paused when they had gone about seventy-five feet. "I left that rope behind," he said, "and we may need it. I'll return and get it, and you both wait right here." With the words he turned and went back into the shadows.

He went as fast as he could, not liking to leave the other two alone. But when he had retrieved the rope and tied it to his waist, he permitted himself a last look up as he passed under the hole in the ceiling--and what he saw there tensed every muscle in his body, and made his heart beat like mad. Again there was a tiny spot of orange in the blackness above!

"Professor!" he yelled excitedly. "Sue! Come here! The sphere's coming back!"

There was no doubt about it. The pin-point of light was growing each second, with the flame of the descending exhausts. Guinness and his daughter ran from the tunnel, and, guided by Phil's excited ejaculations, hurried to his side. Their eyes confirmed what his had seen. The earth-borer was coming down!

"But," Guinness said bewilderedly, "those rockets were enough to lift him!"

This was a mystery. Even though ten rockets were on--ten tiny spots of orange flame--the sphere came down swiftly. The same force which some time before had lifted it slowly up was now insufficient. The roar of the tubes rose rapidly. "Get back!" Phil ordered, remembering the danger, and they all retreated to the mouth of the tunnel, ready to peep cautiously around the edge. Holmes' jaws were locked tight with grim resolution. Quade was coming back! he told himself exultantly. This time he must not go up alone! This time--!

But his half-formed resolutions were idle. He could not know what frightful thing was bringing Quade down--what frightful experience was in store for them all....

CHAPTER IV

Spawn of the Cavern

In a crescendo of noise that stunned their ears, the earth-borer came down. Tongues of fire flared from the hole, speared to the ground and were deflected upward, cradling the metal ball in a wave of flame. Through this fiery curtain the machine slowly lowered to the floor, where a shower of sparks spattered out, blinding the eyes of the
watchers with their brilliance. For a full minute the orange-glowing sphere lay there, quivering from the vibration; then the exhausts died and the wave of flame wavered and sank into nothingness. While their ear-drums continued the thunder, the three stared at the borer, not daring to approach, yet striving to solve the mystery of why it had sunk despite the up-thrust of ten rocket tubes.

As their eyes again became accustomed to the familiar phosphorescent illumination, pallid and cold after the fierce orange flame, they saw why--and their eyes went wide with surprise and horror.

A strange mass was covering the top of the earth-borer--something that looked like a heap of viscid, whitish jelly. It was sprawled shapelessly over the round upper part of the metal sphere, a half-transparent, loathsome stuff, several feet thick in places.

And Phil Holmes, striving to understand what it could be, saw an awful thing. "It's moving!" he whispered, unconsciously drawing Sue closer. "There's--there's life in it!"

Lazy quiverings were running through the mound of jelly, pulsings that gave evidence of its low organism. They saw little ripples of even beat run over it, and under them steady, sluggish convulsions that told of life; that showed, perhaps, that the thing was hungry and preparing to move its body in quest of food.

It was alive, unquestionably. The borer lay still, but this thing moved internally, of itself. It was life in its lowest, most primate form. The mass was mind, stomach, muscle and body all in one, stark and raw before their startled eyes.

"Oh, God!" Phil whispered through the long pause. "It can't be real!..."

"Protoplasm--a monster amoeba," David Guinness's curiously cracked voice said. "Just as it exists on the surface, only microscopically. Primate life...."

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The lock of the earth-borer clicked. Phil gasped. "Quade is coming out!" he said. A little cry of horror came from Sue. And the metal door opened.

James Quade stepped through, automatic in hand. He was fresh from the light inside, and he could not see well. He was quite unconscious of what was oozing down on him from above, of the flabby heap that was carefully stretching down for him. He peered into the gloom, looking for the three he had deserted, and all the time an arm from the mass above crept nearer. Sue Guinness's nerves suddenly gave, and she shrieked; but Quade's ears were deaf from the borer's thunder, and he did not hear her.

It was when he lifted one foot back into the sphere--probably to get out the searchlight--that he felt the thing's presence. He looked up--and a strange sound came from him. For seconds he apparently could not move, stark fear rooting him to the ground, the gun limp in his hand.

Then a surge ran through the mound of flesh, and the arm, a pseudopod, reached more rapidly for him.

It stung Quade into action. He leaped back, brought up his automatic, and fired at the thing once; then three times more. He, and each one of the others, saw four bullets thud into the heap of pallid matter and heard them clang on the metal of the sphere beneath. They had gone right through its flesh--but they showed no slightest effect!

Quade was evidently unwilling to leave the sphere. Jerking his arm up he brought his trigger finger back again. A burst of three more shots barked through the cavern, echoing and re-echoing. The man screamed an inarticulate oath as he saw how useless his bullets were, and hurled the empty gun at the monster--which was down on the floor now, and bunching its sluggish body together.

The automatic went right into it. They could all see it there, in the middle of the amorphous body, while the creature stopped, as if determining whether or not it was food. Quade screwed his courage together in the pause, and tried to dodge past to the door of the sphere; but the monster was alert: another pseudopod sprang out from its shapeless flesh, sending him back on his heels.

The feeler had all but touched Quade, and with the closeness of his escape, the remnants of his courage gave. He yelled, and turned and ran.

* * * * *

He ran straight for the three who watched from the tunnel mouth, and the mound of shapeless jelly came fast on his trail. It came in surging rolls, like thick fluid oozing forward; it would have been hard to measure its size, for each moment it changed. The only impression the four humans had was that of a wave of half-transparent matter that one instant was a sticky ball of viscid flesh and the next a rapidly advancing crescent whose horns reached far out on each flank to cut off retreat.

By instinct Phil jerked Sue around and yelled at the professor to run, for the old man seemed to be frozen into an attitude of fearful interest. Bullets would not stop the thing--could anything? Holmes wondered. He could visualize all too easily the death they would meet if that shapeless, naked protoplastic mass overtook and flowed over them....

But he wasted no time with such thoughts. They ran, all three, into the dark tunnel.
Quade caught up with them quickly. Personal enmity was suspended before this common peril. They could not run at full speed, for a multitude of obstacles hindered them. Tortuous ridges of rock lay directly across their path, formations that had been whipped in some mad, eon-old convulsion and then, through the ages, remained frozen into their present distortion; black pits gaped suddenly before them; half-seen stalagmites, whose crystalline edges were razor-sharp, tore through to their flesh. Haste was perilous where every moment they might stumble into an unseen cleft and go pitching into awful depths below. They were staking everything on the draft that blew steadily in their faces; Phil told himself desperately that it must lead to some opening—it must!

But what if the opening were a vertical, impassable tunnel? He would not think of that....

Old David Guinness tired fast, and was already lagging in the rear when Quade gasped hoarsely:

"Hurry! It's close behind!"

Surging rapidly at a constant distance behind them, it came on. It was as fast as they were, and evidently untiring. It was in its own element; obstacles meant nothing to it. It oozed over the jagged ridges that took the humans precious moments to scramble past, and the speed of its weird progress seemed to increase as theirs faltered. It was a heartless mass driven inexorably by primal instinct towards the food that lay ahead. The dim phosphorescent illumination tinged its flabby tissues a weird white.

The passage they stumbled through narrowed. Long irregular spears of stalactites hung from the unseen ceiling; others, the drippings of ages, pronged up from the floor, shredding their clothes as they jarred into them. One moment they were clambering up-hill, slipping on the damp rock; the next they were sliding down into unprobed darkness, reckless of where they would land. They were aware only that the water-odorous draft was still in their faces, and the hungry mound of flesh behind....

"I can't last much longer!" old Guinness's winded voice gasped. "Best leave me behind. I—I might delay it!"

For answer, Phil went back, grabbed him by the arm and dragged his tired body forward. He was snatching a glance behind to see how close the monster was, when Sue's frightened voice reached him from ahead.

"There's a wall here, Phil—and no way through!"

And then Holmes came to it. It barred the passage, and was apparently unbroken. Yet the draft still came!

"Search for where the draft enters!" he yelled. "You take that side!" And he started feeling over the clammy, uneven surface, searching frantically for a cleft. It seemed to be hopeless. Quade stood staring back into the gloom, his eyes looking for what he knew was surging towards them. His face had gone sickly white, he was trembling as if with fever, and he sucked in air with long, racking gasps.

"Here! I have it!" cried the girl suddenly at her end of the wall. The other three ran over, and saw, just above her head, a narrow rift in the rock, barely wide enough to squirm through. "Into it!" Phil ordered tersely. He grasped her, raised her high, and she wormed through. Quade scrambled to get in next, but Holmes shoved him aside and boosted the old man through. Then he helped the other.

A second after he had swung himself up, a wave of whitish matter rolled up below, hungry pseudopods reaching for the food it knew was near. It began to trickle up the wall....

The crack was narrow and jagged; utterly black. Phil could hear Quade frantically worming himself ahead, and he wondered achingly if it would lead anywhere. Then a faint, clear voice from ahead rang out:

"It's opening up!"

Sue's voice! Phil breathed more easily. The next moment Quade scrambled through; dim light came; and they were in another vast, ghostly-lit cavern.

The crack came out on its floor-level; Guinness was resting near, and his daughter had her hands on a large boulder of rock. "Let's shove it against the hole!" she suggested to Phil. "It might stop it!"

"Good, Sue, good!" he exclaimed, and at once all four of them strained at the chunk, putting forth every bit of strength they had. The boulder stirred, rolled over, and thudded neatly in front of the crack, almost completely sealing it. There was only a cleft of five inches on one side.

But their expression of relief died in their throats. A tiny trickle of white appeared through the niche. The amorphous monster was compressing itself to a single stream, thin enough to squeeze through even that narrow space.

They could not block it. They had nothing to attack it with. There was nothing to do but run.... And hope for a chance to double back....

As nearly as they could make out, this second cavern was as large as the first. They could dimly see the fantastic shapes of hundreds of stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Clumps of stalagmites made the floor a maze which they threaded painfully. The strong steady draft guided them like a radio beacon, leading them to their only faint hope of escape and life. Guinness, very tired, staggered along mechanically, a heavy weight on Phil's
supporting arm; James Quade ran here and there in frantic spurts of speed. Sue was silent, but the hopelessness in her eyes tortured Phil like a wound. His shirt had long since been ripped to shreds; his face, bruised in the first place by the borer he had crashed in, now was scratched and bloody from contact with rough stalagmites.

* * * * *

Then, without warning, they suddenly found among the rough walls on the far side of the cavern, the birthplace of the draft. It lay at the edge of the floor—a dark hole, very wide. Black, sinister and clammy from the draft that poured from it, it pierced vertically down into the very bowels of the earth. It was impassable.

James Quade crumpled at the brink; "It's the end!" he moaned. "We can't go farther! It's the end of the draft!"

The hole blocked their forward path completely. They could not go ahead.... In seconds, it seemed, the slithering that told of the monster's approach sounded from behind. Sue's eyes were already fixed on the awful, surging mass when a voice off to one side yelled:

"Here! Quick!"

It was Phil Holmes. He had been scouting through the gloom, and had found something.

The other three ran to him. "There's another draft going through here," he explained rapidly, pointing to an angled crevice in the rocky wall. "There's a good chance it goes to the cavern where the sphere and the hole to the surface are. Anyway, we've got to take it. I'd better go first, after this--and you, Quade, last. I trust you less than the monster behind."

He turned and edged into the crack, and the others followed as he had ordered. Quickly the passageway broadened, and they found the going much easier than it had been before. For perhaps ten minutes they scrambled along, with the draft always on their backs and the blessed, though faint, fire of hope kindling again. In all that time they did not see their pursuer once, and the hope that they had lost it brought a measure of much needed optimism to drive their tired bodies onward. They found but few time-wasting obstacles. If only the tunnel would continue right into the original cavern! If only their path would stay clear and unhindered!

But it did not. The sound of Phil's footsteps ahead stopped, and when Sue and her father came up they saw why.

"A river!" Phil said.

* * * * *

They were standing on a narrow ledge that overhung an underground river. A fetid smell of age-old, lifeless water rose from it. Dimly, at least fifty feet across, they could see the other side, shrouded in vague shadows. The inky stream beneath did not seem to move at all, but remained smooth and hard and thick-looking.

They could not go around it. The ledge was only a few feet wide, and blocked at each side.

"Got to cross!" Phil said tersely.

Quade, sickly-faced, stared down. "There--there might be other things in that water!" he gasped. "Monsters!"

"Sure," agreed Phil contemptuously. "You'd better stay here." He turned to the others. "I'll see how deep it is," he said, and without the faintest hesitation dove flatly in.


He reached for Sue, helped her down, and did the same for her father. Holding each by the hand, Sue's head barely above the water, he started across. They had not gone more than twenty feet when they heard Quade, left on the bank, give a hoarse yell of fear and dive into the water. Their dread pursuer had caught up with them.

And it followed--on the water! Phil had hoped it would not be able to cross, but once more the thing's astounding adaptability dashed his hopes. Without hesitation, the whitish jelly sprawled out over the water, rolling after them with ghastly, snake-like ripples, its pallid body standing out gruesomely against the black, odorous tide.

Quade came up thrashing madly, some feet to the side of the other three. He was swimming--and swimming with such strength that he quickly left them behind. He would be across before they; and that meant there was a good chance that the earth-borer would go up again with only one passenger....

Phil fought against the water, pulling Sue and her father forward as best he could. From behind came the rippling sound of their shapeless pursuer. "Ten feet more--" Holmes began--then abruptly stopped.

There had been a swish, a ripple upstream. And as their heads turned they saw the water part and a black head, long, evil, glistening, pointing coldly down to where they were struggling towards the shore. Phil Holmes felt his strength ooze out. He heard Professor Guinness gasp:

"A water-snake!"

* * * * *

Its head was reared above the surface, gliding down on them silently, leaving a wedge of long, sluggish ripples behind. When thirty feet away the glistening head dipped under, and a great half-circle of leg-thick body arched out. It was like an oily stream of curved cable; then it ended in a pointed tail--and the creature was entirely under
With desperate strength Phil hauled the girl to the bank and, standing in several feet of water, pushed her up. Then he whirled and yanked old Guinness past him up into the hands of his daughter. With them safe, and Sue reaching out her hand for him, he began to scramble up himself.

But he was too late. There was a swish in the water behind him, and toothless, hard-gummed jaws clamped tight over one leg and drew him back and under. And with the touch of the creature's mouth a stiff shock jolted him; his body went numb; his arms flopped limply down. He was paralyzed.

Sue Guinness cried out. Her father stared helplessly at the spot where his young partner had disappeared with so little commotion.

"It was an eel," he muttered dully. "Some kind of electric eel...."

Phil dimly realized the same thing. A moment later his face broke the surface, but he could not cry out; he could not move his little finger. Only his involuntary muscles kept working--his heart and his lungs. He found he could control his breathing a little.... And then he was wondering why he was remaining motionless on the surface. Gradually he came to understand.

He had not felt it, but the eel had let go its hold on his leg, and had disappeared. But only for a moment. Suddenly, from somewhere near, its gleaming body writhed crazily, and a terrific twist of its tail hit Phil a glancing blow on the chest. He was swept under, and the water around him became a maelstrom. When next he bobbed to the tumultuous surface, he managed to get a much-needed breath of air--and in the swirling currents glimpsed the long, snake-like head of the eel go shooting by, with thin trickles of stuff that looked like white jelly clinging to it.

That explained what was happening. The eel had been challenged by the ameboid monster, and they were fighting for possession of him--the common prey.

The water became an inferno of whipping and lashing movements, of whitish fibers and spearing thrusts of a glistening black electric body. Unquestionably the eel was using its numbing electric shock on its foe. Time and time again Phil felt the amoeba grasp him, searingly, only to be wrenched free by the force of the currents the combat stirred up. Once he thudded into the bottom of the river, and his lungs seemed about to burst before he was again shot to the top and managed to get a breath. At last the water quieted somewhat, and Phil, at the surface, saw the eel bury its head in a now apathetic mound of flesh.

It tore a portion loose with savage jaws, a portion that still writhed after it was separated from the parent mass; and then the victor glided swiftly downstream, and disappeared under the surface....

Holmes floated helplessly on the inky water. He could see the amoeba plainly; it was still partly paralyzed, for it was very still. But then a faint tremor ran through it; a wave ran over its surface--and it moved slowly towards him once again.

Desperately Phil tried to retreat. The will was there, but the body would not work. Save for a feeble flutter of his hands and feet, he could not move. He could not even turn around to bid Sue and David Guinness good-by--with his eyes....

Then a fresh, loved voice sounded just behind him, and he felt something tighten around his waist.

"It's all right, dear!" the voice called. "Hang on; we'll get you out!"

Sue had come in after him! She had grasped the rope tied to his belt, and she and her father were pulling him back to the bank!

He wanted to tell her to go back--the amoeba was only feet away--but he could only manage a little croak. And then he was safe up on the ledge at the other side of the river.

A surge of strength filled his limbs, and he knew the shock was rapidly wearing off. But it was also wearing off of the monster in the water. Its speed increased; the ripplings of its amorphous body-substance became quicker, more excited. It came on steadily.

While it came, the girl and her father worked desperately over Phil, massaging his body and pulling him further up the bank. It had all but reached the bank when Holmes gasped:

"I think I can walk now. Where--where did Quade go to?"

Guinness gestured over to the right, up a dim winding passage through the rocks.

"Then we must follow--fast!" Phil said, staggering to his feet. "He may get to the sphere first; he'll go up by himself even yet! I'm all right!"

Despite his words, he could not run, and could only command an awkward walk. Sue lifted one of his arms around her shoulder, and her father took the other, and without a backward glance they labored ahead. But Phil's strength quickly returned, and they raised the pace until they had broken once more into a stumbling run.

How far ahead James Quade was, they did not know, but obviously they could follow where he had gone. Once
again the draft was strong on their backs. They felt sure they were on the last stretch, headed for the earth-borer. But, unless they could overtake Quade, he would be there first. They had no illusions about what that would mean....

CHAPTER V

A Death More Hideous

Quade was there first.

When they burst out of a narrow crevice, not far from the funnel-shaped opening they had originally entered, they saw him standing beside the open door of the sphere as if waiting. The searchlight inside was still on, and in its shaft of light they could see that he was smiling thinly, once more his old, confident self. It would only take him a second to jump in, slam the door and lock it. He could afford a last gesture....

The three stopped short. They saw something he did not.

"So!" he observed in his familiar, mocking voice. He paused, seeing that they did not come on. He had plenty of time.

He said something else, but the two men and the girl did not hear what it was. As if by a magnet their eyes were held by what was hanging above him, clinging to the lip of the hole the sphere had made in the ceiling.

It was an amoeba, another of those single-celled, protoplasmic mounds of flesh. It had evidently come down through the hole; and now it was stretching, rubber-like, lower and lower, a living, reaching stalactite of whitish hunger.

Quade was all unconscious of it. His final words reached Phil's consciousness.

"... And this time, of course, I will keep the top disintegrators on. No other monster will then be able to weigh me down!"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to the door. And that movement was the signal that brought his doom. Without a sound, the poised mass above dropped.

James Quade never knew what hit him. The heap of whitish jelly fell squarely. There was a brief moment of frantic lashing, of tortured struggles--then only tiny ripples running through the monster as it fed.

Sue Guinness turned her head. But the two men for some reason could not take their eyes away....

* * * * *

It was the girl's voice that jerked them back to reality. "The other!" she gasped. "It's coming, behind!"

They had completely forgotten the mass in the tunnel. Turning, they saw that it was only fifteen feet away and approaching fast, and instinctively they ran out into the cavern, skirting the sphere widely. When they came to Quade's wrecked borer Phil, who had snatched a glance behind, dragged them down behind it. For he had seen their pursuer abandon the chase and go to share in the meal of its fellow.

"We'd best not get too far away," he whispered. "When they leave the front of the borer, maybe we can make a dash for it."

For minutes that went like hours the young man watched, waiting for the creatures to be done, hoping that they would go away. Fortunately the sphere lay between, and he was not forced to see too much. Only one portion of one of the monsters was visible, lapping out from behind the machine....

At last his body tensed, and he gripped Sue and her father's arm in quick warning. The things were leaving the sphere. Or, rather, only one was. For Phil saw that they had agglutinated--merged into oneness--and now the monster that remained was the sum of the sizes of the original two. And more....

They all watched. And they all saw the amoeba stop, hesitate for a moment--and come straight for the wrecked borer behind which they were hidden.

"Damn!" Phil whispered hoarsely. "It's still hungry--and it's after us!"

David Guinness sighed wearily. "It's heavy and sluggish, now," he said, "so maybe if we run again.... Though I don't know how I can last any longer...."

Holmes did not answer. His eyes were narrowed; he was casting about desperately for a plan. He hardly felt Sue's light touch on his arm as she whispered:

"In case, Phil--in case.... This must be good-by...."

But the young man turned to her with gleaming eyes. "Good-by, nothing!" he cried. "We've still got a card to play!"

* * * * *

She stared at him, wondering if he had cracked from the strain of what he had passed through. But his next words assured her he had not. "Go back, Sue," he said levelly. "Go far back. We'll win through this yet."

She hesitated, then obeyed. She crept back from the wrecked borer, back into the dim rear, eyes on Phil and the sluggish mass that moved inexorably towards him. When she had gone fifteen or twenty yards she paused, and watched the two men anxiously.

Phil was talking swiftly to Professor Guinness. His voice was low and level, and though she could not hear the
words she could catch the tone of assurance that ran through them. She saw her father nod his head, and he seemed to make the gesture with vigor. "I will," she heard him say; and he slapped Phil on the back, adding: "But for God's sake, be careful!"

And with these words the old man wormed inside Quade's wrecked borer and was gone from the girl's sight.

She wanted desperately to run forward and learn what Phil intended to do, but she restrained herself and obeyed his order. She waited, and watched; and saw the young man stand up, look at the slowly advancing monster—and deliberately walk right into its path!

Sue could not move from her fright. In a daze she saw Phil advance cautiously towards the amoeba and pause when within five feet of it. The thing stopped; remained absolutely motionless. She saw him take another short step forward. This time a pseudopod emerged, and reached slowly out for him. Phil avoided it easily, but by so narrow a margin that the girl's heart stopped beating. Then she saw him step back; and, snail-like, the creature followed, pausing twice, as if wary and suspicious. Slowly Phil Holmes drew it after him.

To Sue, who did not know what was his plan, it seemed a deliberate invitation to death. She forgot about her father, lying inside the mangled borer, waiting. She did not see that Phil was leading the monster directly in front of it....

* * * * *

It was a grotesque, silent pursuit. The creature appeared to be unalert; its movements were sloth-like; yet the girl knew that if Phil once ventured an inch too close, or slipped, or tried to dodge past it to the sphere, its torpidness would vanish and it would have him. His maneuvering had to be delicate, judged to a matter of inches. Tense with the suspense, the strain of the slow-paced seconds, she watched—and yet hardly dared to watch, fearful of the awful thing she might see.

It was a fantastic game of tag her lover was playing, with death the penalty for tardiness. The slow, enticing movements were repeated again and again, Phil advancing very close, and stepping back in the nick of time. Always he barely avoided the clutching white arms that were extended, and little by little he decoyed the thing onward....

Then came the end. As Holmes was almost in front of the wrecked machine, Sue saw him glance quickly aside—and, as if waiting for that moment when he would be off guard, the monster whipped forward in a great, reaching surge.

Sue's ragged nerves cracked: she shrieked. They had him! She started forward, then halted abruptly. With a tremendous leap, Phil Holmes had wrenched free and flung himself backwards. She heard his yell:

"Now!!"

* * * * *

There was a sputter from the bottom of the outstretched borer; then, like the crack of a whip, came a bellow of awful sound.

A thick cloud of dust reared up, and the ear-numbing thunder rolled through the cavern in great pulsing echoes. And then Sue Guinness understood what the young man had been about.

The disintegrators of James Quade's borer had sent a broad beam of annihilation into the monster. His own machine had destroyed his destroyer—and given his intended victims their only chance to escape from the dread fate he had schemed for them.

Sue could see no trace of the creature in its pyre of slow-swirling dust. Caught squarely, its annihilation had been utter. And then, through the thunder that still echoed in her ear-drums, she heard a joyful voice.

"We got 'em!"

Through the dusty haze Phil appeared at her side. He flung his arms up exultantly, swept her off the ground, hugged her close.

"We got 'em!" he cried again. "We're free--free to go up!"

Professor David Guinness crawled from the borer. His face, for the first time since the descent, wore a broad smile. Phil ran over to him, slapped him on the back; and the older man said:

"You did it beautifully, Phil." He turned to Sue. "He had to decoy them right in front of the disintegrators. It was--well, it was magnificent!"

"All credit to Sue: she was my inspiration!" Phil said, laughing. "But now," he added, "let's see if we can fix those dead rocket-tubes. I have a patient up above--and, anyway, I'm not over-fond of this place!"

* * * * *

The three had won through. They had blasted four miles down from the surface of the earth. The brain of an elderly scientist, the quick-witted courage of a young engineer, had achieved the seemingly impossible—and against obstacles that could not have been predicted. Death had attended that achievement, as death often does accompany great forward steps; James Quade had gone to a death more hideous than that he devised for the others. But, in spite of the justice of it, a moment of silence fell on the three survivors as they came to the spot where his fate at last had
caught up to him.

But it was only a moment. It was relieved by Professor Guinness's picking up the chunk of radium ore his former partner had hewn from the cavern's wall. He held it up for all to see, and smiled.

"Here it is," he said simply.

Then he led the way into his earth-borer, and the little door closed quietly and firmly into place.

For a few minutes slight tapping came from within, as if a wrench or a screwdriver were being used. Then the tapping stopped, and all was silence.

A choke, a starting cough, came from beneath the sphere. A torrent of rushing sound burst out, and spears of orange flame spurted from the bottom and splashed up its sides, bathing it in fierce, brilliant light. It stirred. Then, slowly and smoothly, the great ball of metal raised up.

It hit the edge of the hole in the ceiling, and hung there, hesitating. Side-rockets flared, and the sphere angled over. Then it slid, roaring, through the hole.

Swiftly the spots of orange from its rocket-tube exhausts died to pin-points. There were now almost twenty of them. And soon these pin-points wavered, and vanished utterly.

Then there was only blackness in the hole that went up to the surface. Blackness in the hole, calm night on the desert above--and silence, as if the cavern were brooding on the puny figures and strange machines that had for the first time dared invade its solitude, in the realms four miles within the earth....

Contents

HEIST JOB ON THIZAR
By RANDALL GARRETT

In the future, we may discover new planets; our ships may rocket to new worlds; robots may be smarter than people. But we'll still have slick characters willing and able to turn a fast buck--even though they have to be smarter than Einstein to do it.

Anson Drake sat quietly in the Flamebird Room of the Royal Gandyll Hotel, listening to the alien, but soothing strains of the native orchestra and sipping a drink. He knew perfectly well that he had no business displaying himself in public on the planet Thizar; there were influential Thizarians who held no love for a certain Earthman named Anson Drake.

It didn't particularly bother Drake; life was danger and danger was life to him, and Anson Drake was known on half a hundred planets as a man who could take care of himself.

Even so, he wouldn't have bothered to come if it had not been for the fact that Viron Belgezad was a pompous braggart.

Belgezad had already suffered at the hands of Anson Drake. Some years before, a narcotics gang had been smashed high, wide, and handsome on Thizar. Three men had died from an overdose of their own thionite drug, and fifty thousand credits of illicit gain had vanished into nowhere. The Thizarian police didn't know who had done the job, and they didn't know who had financed the ring.

But Belgezad knew that Anson Drake was the former, and Drake knew that Viron Belgezad was the latter. And each one was waiting his chance to get the other.

A week before, Drake had been relaxing happily on a beach on Seladon II, twelve light-years from Thizar, reading a newsfax. He had become interested in an article which told of the sentencing of a certain lady to seven years in Seladon Prison, when his attention was attracted by another headline.

VIRON BELGEZAD BUYS ALGOL NECKLACE
Thizar (GNS)--Viron Belgezad, wealthy Thizarian financier, has purchased the fabulous Necklace of Algol, it was announced today. The necklace, made of matched Star Diamonds, is estimated to be worth more than a million credits, although the price paid by Belgezad is not known.

Such an interesting bit seemed worthy of further investigation, so Drake had immediately booked passage on the first space liner to Thizar.

And thus it was that an immaculately dressed, broad-shouldered, handsome young man sat quietly in the Flamebird Room of Thizar's flashiest hostelry surveying his surroundings with steady green eyes and wondering how he was going to get his hands on the Necklace of Algol.
The police couldn't touch Belgezad, but Anson Drake could—and would.

"Hello, Drake," said a cold voice at his elbow.

Drake turned and looked up into the sardonically smiling face of Jomis Dobigel, the heavy-set, dark-faced Thizarian who worked with Belgezad.

"Well, well," Anson said, smiling. "If it isn't Little Bo-Peep. How is the dope business? And how is the Big Dope Himself?"

Dobigel's smile soured. "You're very funny, Earthman. But we don't like Earthmen here."

"Do sit down, Dobbie, and tell me all about it. The last I heard—which was three hours ago—the government of Thizar was perfectly happy to have me here. In fact, they were good enough to stamp my passport to prove it."

Dobigel pulled out a chair and sat down, keeping his hands beneath the table. "What are you doing here, Drake?" he asked in a cold voice.

"I couldn't help it," Drake said blandly. "I was drawn back by the memory of the natural beauties of your planet. The very thought of the fat, flabby face of old Belgezad, decorated with a bulbous nose that is renowned throughout the Galaxy, was irresistible. So here I am."

Dobigel's dark face grew even darker. "I know you, Drake. And I know why you're here. Tomorrow is the date for the Coronation of His Serenity, the Shan of Thizar."

"True," Drake agreed. "And I wouldn't miss it for all the loot in Andromeda. A celebration like that is worth traveling parsecs to see."

Dobigel leaned across the table. "Belgezad is a Noble of the Realm," he said slowly. "He'll be at the Coronation. You know he's going to wear the Necklace of Algol as well as anyone, and you--"

Suddenly, he leaned forward a little farther, his right hand stabbing out toward Drake's leg beneath the table. But Anson Drake was ready for him. Dobigel's hand was a full three inches from Drake's thigh when a set of fingers grasped his wrist in a viselike hold. Steely fingers bit in, pressing nerves against bone. With a gasp, Dobigel opened his hand. A small, metallic cylinder dropped out.

Drake caught it with his free hand and smiled. "That's impolite, Dobbie. It isn't proper to try to give your host an injection when he doesn't want it."

Casually, he put the cylinder against the arm which he still held and squeezed the little metal tube. There was a faint pop! Drake released the arm and handed back the cylinder. Dobigel's face was white.

"I imagine that was twelve-hour poison," Drake said kindly. "If you hurry, old Belgezad will give you the antidote. It will be painful, but--" He shrugged.

"And by the way, Brother Dobigel," he continued, "let me give you some advice. The next time you try to get near a victim with one of those things, don't do it by talking to him about things he already knows. It doesn't distract him enough."

Dobigel stood up, his fists clenched. "I'll get you for this, Drake." Then he turned and stalked off through the crowd.

No one had noticed the little by-play. Drake smiled seraphically and finished his drink. Dobigel was going to be uncomfortable for a while. Twelve-hour poison was a complex protein substance that could be varied in several thousand different ways, and only an antidote made from the right variation would work for each poison. If the antidote wasn't given, the victim died within twelve hours. And even if the antidote was given, getting over poison wasn't any fun at all.

Reflecting happily on the plight of Jomis Dobigel, Anson Drake paid his bill, tipped the waiter liberally, and strolled out of the Flamebird Room and into the lobby of the Royal Gandyll Hotel. The Coronation would begin early tomorrow, and he didn't want to miss the beginning of it. The Shan's Coronation was the affair of Thizar.

He went over to the robot newsvender and dropped a coin in the slot. The reproducer hummed, and a freshly-printed newsfax dropped out.

He headed for the lift tube, which whisked him up to his room on the eighty-first floor. He inserted his key in the lock and pressed the button on the tip. The electronic lock opened, and the door slid into the wall. Before entering, Drake took a look at the detector on his wrist. There was no sign of anything having entered the room since he had left it. Only then did he go inside.

With one of the most powerful financiers on Thizar out after his blood, there was no way of knowing what might happen, and therefore no reason to take chances.

There were some worlds where Anson Drake would no more have stayed in a public hotel than he would have jumped into an atomic furnace, especially if his enemy was a man as influential as Belgezad. But Thizar was a
civilized and reasonably well policed planet; the police were honest and the courts were just. Even Belgezad couldn't
do anything openly.

Drake locked his door, sang to himself in a pleasant baritone while he bathed, put on his pajamas, and lay down
on his bed to read the paper.

* * * * *

It was mostly full of Coronation news. Noble So-and-So would wear such-and-such, the Archbishop would do
thus-and-so. There was another item about Belgezad; his daughter was ill and would be unable to attend. Bloody
shame, thought Drake. Too bad Belgezad isn't sick--or dying.

There was further mention of the Necklace of Algol; it was second only to the Crown Jewels of the Shan
himself. The precautions being taken were fantastic; at a quick guess, about half the crowd would be policemen.

The door announcer chimed. Drake sat up and punched the door TV. The screen showed the face of a girl
standing at his door. Drake smiled in appreciation. She had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a smooth, tanned
complexion. It was a beautiful face, and it showed promise of having a body to match.

"Who, may I ask, is calling on a gentleman at this ungodly hour, and thus compromising her reputation and fair
name?"

The girl smiled, showing even, white teeth, and her eyes sparkled, showing flickers of little golden flames
against the brown. "I see I've found the right room," she said. "That voice couldn't belong to anyone but Anson
Drake." Then she lowered her voice and said softly: "Let me in. I'm Norma Knight."

Drake felt a tingle of psychic electricity flow over his skin; there was a promise of danger and excitement in the
air. Norma Knight was known throughout this whole sector of the Galaxy as the cleverest jewel thief the human race
had ever spawned. Drake had never met her, but he had definitely heard of her.

He touched the admission stud, and the door slid silently aside. There was no doubt about it, her body did
match her face.

* * * * *

"Do come in, Norma," he said.
She stepped inside, and Drake touched the closing button. The door slid shut behind her.
She stood there for a moment, looking at him, and Drake took the opportunity to study the girl more closely. At
last, she said: "So you're Anson Drake. You're even better looking than I'd heard you were. Congratulations."

"I have a good press agent," Drake said modestly. "What's on your mind?" He waved his hand at a nearby
chair.

"The same thing that's on yours, I suspect," she said. "Do you have a drink to spare?"

Drake unlimbered himself from the bed, selected a bottle from the menu and dialed. The robot bellhop whirred,
a chute opened in the wall, and a bottle slid out. Drake poured, handed the tumbler to the girl, and said: "This is your
party; what do you have in mind?"

The girl took a sip of her drink before she answered. Then she looked up at Drake with her deep brown eyes.
"Two things. One: I have no intention or desire to compete with Anson Drake for the Necklace of Algol. Both of us
might end up in jail with nothing for our pains."

"Two: I have a foolproof method for getting the necklace, but none for getting it off the planet. I think you
probably have a way."

Drake nodded. "I dare say I could swing it. How does it happen that you don't have an avenue of disposal
planned?"

She looked bleak for a moment. "The man who was to help me decided to back out at the last minute. He didn't
know what the job was, and I wouldn't tell him because I didn't trust him."

"And you trust me?"

Her eyes were very trustful. "I've heard a lot about you, Drake, and I happen to know you never doublecross
anyone unless they doublecross you first."

"Trade about is fair play, to quote an ancient maxim," Drake said, grinning. "And I am a firm believer in fair
play."

"But that's neither here nor there. The point is: what do you have to offer? Why shouldn't I just pinch the gems
myself and do a quick flit across the Galaxy? That would give me all the loot."

She shook her head. "Belgezad is on to you, you know. He knows you're here. His own private police and the
Shan's own Guard will be at the Coronation to protect all that jewelry." She cocked her pretty head to one side and
looked at him. "What's between you and Belgezad, anyway?"

"I stole his toys when he was a child," said Drake, "and he hasn't trusted me since. How do you propose to get
the Necklace of Algol if I can't?"

She smiled and shook her head slowly. "That would be telling. You let me take care of my part, and I'll let you
take care of yours."
  
  Drake shook his head—not so slowly. "Absolutely not. We either work together or we don't work at all."

* * * * *

The girl frowned in thought for a moment, and then reached into the belt pouch at her side and pulled out a square of electro-engraved plastic. She handed it to Drake.

Underneath all the flowery verbiage, it boiled down to an invitation to attend the post-Coronation reception. It was addressed to "Miss Caroline Smith" and was signed and sealed by the Shan of Thizar himself.

"I'm 'Caroline Smith'," she said. "I've managed to get in good with the family of Belgezad, and he wangled the invitation.

"Now, the plan is this: Right after the Invocation, while the new Shan is being prepared in his special Coronation Robes, the Nobles have to change their uniforms from red to green. Belgezad will go into his suite in the Palace to change. He'll be accompanied by two guards. One will stay on the outside, the other will help Belgezad dress. I've got the room next to his, and I've managed to get the key that unlocks the door between them. I'll use this--" She pulled a small globe of metal from her belt pouch. "It's a sleep-gas bomb. It'll knock them out for at least twenty minutes. No one will come in during that time, and I'll be able to get the necklace and get out of the palace before they wake up."

"They'll know you did it," Drake pointed out. "If you're still missing when they come to, the thief's identity will be obvious."

She nodded. "That's where you come in. I'll simply go out into the garden and throw it over the wall to you. We'll meet here afterwards."

Drake thought it over and smiled devilishly. "It sounds fine. Now let's co-ordinate everything."

They went over the whole plot again, this time with a chart of the palace to mark everything out and a time schedule was arranged. Then they toasted to success and the girl left.

When she was gone, Anson Drake smiled ruefully to himself and opened a secret compartment in his suitcase. From it, he removed a long strand of glittering jewels.

"A perfect imitation," Drake said. "And you're very pretty. It's a shame I won't be able to hang you around the neck of Belgezad in place of the real Necklace of Algol."

But his original plan had been more dangerous than the present one, and Anson Drake was always ready to desert a good plan for a better one.

* * * * *

Coronation Day dawned bright and clear, and the festivities began early. There were speeches and parades and dancing in the streets. A huge fleet of high-flying rockets rumbled high in the stratosphere, filling the sky with the white traceries of their exhausts. For all of Thizar, it was a holiday, a day of rejoicing and happiness. Cheers for the Shan filled the streets, and strains of music came from the speakers of the public communications system.

Anson Drake missed most of the fun; he was too busy making plans. The day passed as he worked.

Thizar's sun began to set as the hour for the actual Crowning of the Shan approached. At the proper time, Drake was waiting in the shadows outside the palace walls. There were eyes watching him, and he knew it, but he only smiled softly to himself and waited.

"Ssssst!"

It was the girl, on the other side of the wall.

"I'm here," whispered Drake.

Something that glittered faintly in the soft light of the twin moons of Thizar arced over the wall. Drake caught it in his hands. The Necklace of Algol!

He slipped it into a small plastic box he was carrying and then glanced at the detector on his wrist. The screen showed a pale blue pip which indicated that someone was hidden in the shadows a few yards to his right.

Drake didn't even glance toward the spy. He put the plastic box containing the necklace into his belt pouch and strode away from the palace. He had, he figured, about twenty minutes.

He headed directly for the spaceship terminal. Never once did he look back, but the detector on his wrist told him that he was being closely followed. Excellent!

Inside the terminal, he went directly to the baggage lockers. He found one that was empty, inserted a coin, and opened it. From his pouch, he took a plastic box, put it in the locker, switched on the lock with his key, and strolled away.

* * * * *

He glanced again at his detector. He was no longer being followed by the same man; another had taken up the trail. It figured; it figured.

He went straight to the Hotel Gandyll, making sure that his tail didn't lose him. Not until they were in the lobby
did he make any attempt to shake the man who was following him. He went into the bar, ordered a drink, and took a sip. He left his change and the drink on the bar and headed out the door in the direction of the men's room. Whoever was following him wouldn't realize for a minute or two that he was leaving for good. A man doesn't usually leave change and an unfinished drink in a bar.

Drake took the lift tube up to his room, attended to some unfinished business, and waited.

* * * * *

Less than three minutes later, the door was opened. In walked Viron Belgezad and his lieutenant, Jomis Dobigel. Both of them looked triumphant, and they were surrounded by a squad of Royal Police.

"There he is," said Dobigel. "Arrest him!"

A police officer stepped forward. "Anson Drake, I arrest you in the name of the Shan," he said.

Drake grinned. "On what charge?"

"The theft of the Necklace of Algol."

Drake looked directly at Belgezad. "Did old Fatface here say I took it?"

"You can't talk that way," Dobigel snarled, stepping forward.

"Who says so, Ugly?"

At that, Dobigel stepped forward and threw a hard punch from his shoulder--straight at Drake's face.

It never landed. Drake side-stepped it and brought a smashing uppercut up from his knees. It lifted Dobigel off his feet and sent him crashing back against old Belgezad, toppling them both to the floor.

The policemen had all drawn their guns, but Drake was standing placidly in the middle of the room, his hands high above his head regarding the scene calmly.

"I'll go quietly," he said. "I've got no quarrel with the police."

One of the officers led him out into the hall while the others searched his room. Belgezad was sputtering incoherently. Another policeman was trying to wake up Dobigel.

"If you're looking for the Necklace of Algol, Drake said, "you won't find it there."

The captain of the police squad said: "We know that, Mr. Drake. We are merely looking for other evidence. We already have the necklace." He reached in his belt pouch and took out a small plastic box. He opened it, disclosing a glittering rope of jewels. "You were seen depositing this in a baggage locker at the spaceship terminal. We have witnesses who saw you, and we had it removed under police supervision."

Viron Belgezad smiled nastily. "This time you won't get away, Drake! Stealing anything from the palace of the Shan carries a minimum penalty of twenty years in Thizar Prison."

Drake said nothing as they took him off to the Royal Police Station and locked him in a cell.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon of the next day when the Prosecutor for the Shan visited Drake's cell. He was a tall, imposing man, and Drake knew him by reputation as an honest, energetic man.

"Mr. Drake," he said as he sat down in a chair in the cell, "you have refused to speak to anyone but me. I am, of course, perfectly willing to be of any assistance, but I am afraid I must warn you that any statement made to me will be used against you at the trial."

Drake leaned back in his own chair. One thing nice about Thizar, he reflected; they had comfortable jails.

"My Lord Prosecutor," he said, "I'd like to make a statement. As I understand it, Belgezad claims he was gassed, along with a police guard who was with him. When he woke up, the necklace was gone. He didn't see his assailant."

"That is correct," said the Prosecutor.

Drake grinned. That was the way it had to be. Belgezad couldn't possibly have bribed the cop, so they both had to be gassed.

"If he didn't see his assailant, how does he know who it was?"

"You were followed from the palace by Jomis Dobigel, who saw you put the necklace into the baggage locker. There are several other witnesses to that."

Drake leaned forward. "Let me point out, my Lord Prosecutor, that the only evidence you have that I was anywhere near the palace is the word of Jomis Dobigel. And he didn't see me inside the palace. I was outside the wall."

The Prosecutor shrugged. "We admit the possibility of an assistant inside the walls of the palace," he said. "We are investigating that now. But even if we never find your accomplice, we have proof that you were implicated, and that is enough."

"What proof do you have?" Drake asked blandly.

"Why, the necklace itself, of course!" The Prosecutor looked as though he suspected Drake of having taken leave of his senses.
Drake shook his head. "That necklace is mine. I can prove it. It was made for me by a respectable jeweler on Seladon II. It's a very good imitation, but it's a phoney. They aren't diamonds; they're simply well-cut crystals of titanium dioxide. Check them if you don't believe me."

The Lord Prosecutor looked dumbfounded. "But--what--why--"

Drake looked sad. "I brought it to give to my good friend, the Noble Belgezad. Of course it would be a gross insult to wear them at the Shan's Coronation, but he could wear them at other functions.

"And how does my good friend repay me? By having me arrested. My Lord Prosecutor, I am a wronged man."

The Prosecutor swallowed heavily and stood up. "The necklace has, naturally, been impounded by the police. I shall have the stones tested."

"You'll find they're phonies," Drake said. "And that means one of two things. Either they are not the ones stolen from Belgezad or else Belgezad has mortally insulted his Shan by wearing false jewels to the Coronation."

"Well! We shall see about this!" said the Lord Prosecutor.

* * * * *

Anson Drake, free as a lark, was packing his clothes in his hotel room when the announcer chimed. He punched the TV pickup and grinned. It was the girl.

When the door slid aside, she came in, smiling. "You got away with it, Drake! Wonderful! I don't know how you did it, but--"

"Did what?" Drake looked innocent.

"Get away with the necklace, of course! I don't know how it happened that Dobigel was there, but--"

"But, but, but," Drake said, smiling. "You don't seem to know very much at all, do you?"

"Wha--what do you mean?"

Drake put his last article of clothing in his suitcase and snapped it shut. "I'll probably be searched pretty thoroughly when I get to the spaceport," he said coolly, "but they won't find anything on an innocent man."

"Where is the necklace?" she asked in a throaty voice.

Drake pretended not to hear her. "It's a funny thing," he said. "Old Belgezad would never let the necklace out of his hands except to get me. He thought he'd get it back by making sure I was followed. But he made two mistakes."

The girl put her arms around his neck. "His mistakes don't matter as long as we have the necklace, do they?"

Anson Drake was never a man to turn down an invitation like that. He held her in his arms and kissed her--long and lingeringly.

When he broke away, he went on as though nothing had happened.

"Two mistakes. The first one was thinking up such an obviously silly plot. If it were as easy to steal jewels from the palace as all that, nothing would be safe on Thizar."

"The second mistake was sending his daughter to trap me."

* * * * *

The girl gasped and stepped back.

"It was very foolish of you, Miss Belgezad," he went on calmly. "You see, I happened to know that the real Norma Knight was sentenced to seven years in Seladon Prison over a week ago. Unfortunately, the news hadn't reached Thizar yet. I knew from the first that the whole thing was to be a frame-up. It's too bad that your father had to use the real necklace--it's a shame he lost it."

The girl's eyes blazed. "You--you thief! You--" She used words which no self-respecting lady is supposed to use.

Drake waited until she had finished, and then said: "Oh, no, Miss Belgezad; I'm no thief. Your father can consider the loss of that necklace as a fine for running narcotics. And you can tell him that if I catch him again, it will be worse.

"I don't like his kind of slime, and I'll do my best to get rid of them. That's all, Miss B.; it was nice knowing you."

He walked out of the room, leaving her to stand there in helpless fury.

His phony necklace had come in handy after all; the police had thought they had the real one, so they had never bothered to check the Galactic Mail Service for a small package mailed to Seladon II. All he'd had to do was drop it into the mail chute from his room and then cool his heels in jail while the Galactic Mails got rid of the loot for him.

The Necklace of Algol would be waiting for him when he got to Seladon II.

THE END
HEX
By Laurence Mark Janifer

She was a young, enthusiastic worker for the Welfare Department. She liked helping people ... only she really-but-good helped them!

The office wasn't very bright or sunny, but that didn't matter. In the first place, if Gloria really wanted sun, she could always get some by tuning in on a mind outside, someone walking the streets of downtown New York. And, in the second place, the weather wasn't important; what mattered was how you felt inside. Gloria took off her beret and crammed it into a drawer of her desk. She sat down, feeling perfectly ready for work, her bright eyes sparkling and her whole twenty-one-year-old body eager for the demands of the day.

It was ten minutes to nine in the morning.
On the desk was a mass of reports and folders. Gloria looked at them and sighed; the cleaning woman, she thought, must have upset everything again.

But neatness was the keystone of good, efficient work in any field. Gloria set to work rearranging everything in a proper order. The job took her nearly twenty minutes and, by the time she was finished, the office was full.

Mr. Fredericksohn hadn't arrived yet, naturally. He always came in around nine-thirty. But all of the case workers were ready for the day's work. Gloria looked around the office at them, beaming. It was good to be able to help people and to know that what you were doing was right.

She remembered wondering how you could be sure you were right about somebody else, if you couldn't read minds. But, then, there were rules to go by, and all of the fine classes and textbooks that a social case worker had to have. If you paid attention, and if you really wanted to help people, Gloria supposed, it was all right. Certainly everything in her own office seemed to run smoothly.

Not that she would ever do anything about another worker, no matter what. Gloria remembered what Mr. Greystone, a teacher of hers had said, a year or so before: "Never interfere with the case load of another worker. Your sole job is represented by your own case load."

That was good advice, Gloria thought. And, anyhow, her assistance didn't seem to be too badly needed, among the others. She had quite enough to do in taking care of her own clients.

And here she was, wasting time! She shook her head and breathed a little sigh, and began on the first folder.

Name: GIRONDE, JOSE R.

Name: Wladek, Mrs. Marie Posner. She was no fool. She knew about the reports they had to make, and the sheets covered with all the details of your very own private life; she had seen them on a desk when she had come to keep her appointment. Mrs. Wladek was her name, and that was how the report would look, with her name all reversed in order right on the top. And underneath that there would be her address and her story, all that she had told the case workers, set right down in black and white for anybody at all to read.

When you were poor, you had no privacy, and that was the truth. Mrs. Wladek shook her head. A poor old woman, that was all that she was, and privacy was a luxury not to be asked for. Who said the United States was different from the old country?

Cossacks, she thought. In the old country, one still heard the old stories, the streets paved with gold and the food waiting for such as yourself; oh, the war had not changed that in the least. Now the Voice of America was heard in the old country—she had a letter, smuggled out, from her own second-cousin Marfa, telling her all about the Voice of America—and that was only another trap. They wanted to make you leave your own land and your own country, and come far away to America and to the United States, so that you would have no friends and you would be defenseless.

Then you could not help yourself. Then you had to do what they asked you, because there was no other way to eat. There were no friends to feed you dinners or to allow you room in a good house. No. There was only the case worker with her reports that took the last bit of privacy away from an old woman, and left her with barely enough money to remain alive.

"Get a job," they said. "Tell your son to get a job. He is young and strong and healthy."

Certainly! But the United States is not a place in which to work. The United States will give you money. This fact she had from her uncle Bedrich, who had come to the new country years before, and who had written many letters back to his family before his death in an accident.

Should she, then, work? Should her own son, her own Rudi, be forced to work out his time of youth? Surely a little privacy was a small enough thing to surrender for freedom and ease?
But that they should ask for you to surrender it ... Cossacks!

Mrs. Wladek stood up carefully—her old bones creaked, and she could feel them creaking. She looked around the tiny living room, covered with dust. One should have the money to hire a maid. But the case workers had never understood that. Young things, of course they knew nothing of the troubles facing an old woman.

An old woman needed a maid.

She laughed briefly to herself at the idea, and realized at the same time that she had been hiding her own thoughts from herself.

Today was her appointment day, and the new one would be there, blond and young and smiling at her with the innocent face. There was something wrong with the new one; she could see that. In the old country there were stories—

Are you, Marie Wladek, afraid of a young woman? Does your age count for nothing? Does your experience and knowledge count for nothing?

And yet, she had to admit to herself that she was afraid, and that she was afraid of giving a name to her fear. Only a fool could mock at the stories told in the old country, and Mrs. Wladek knew of such a fool; he had died with mockery on his lips, but all had known what had killed him.

Can you not battle a young woman, and win, Marie Wladek?

And yet the young woman had something strange about her, and Mrs. Wladek remembered the old stories, and thought of witchcraft.

Who could fight witchcraft?

Even when the witch was a young girl without experience, and with an innocent face and blond hair—

Mrs. Wladek looked at the mantel clock she had brought with her across the ocean. It told perfect time; it was as good as everything from the old country. Here in America they had no such clocks. Here everything ran by electricity, and when you touched it there was a shock, which was unnatural.

The old clock told the time: nine-thirty. Appointment hour was approaching. Mrs. Wladek did not want to leave the house. She did not want to face this new case worker.

But, all the same, one had to have money to live.

That they should force an old woman to travel across the city and to speak with a girl, by appointment, solely in order to get the money which should have been hers by right!

Cossacks! Monsters!

Name: GIRONDE, JOSE R.
Address: 1440 Hamilton Street
Borough: New York
Phone: None

Complaint: Client is over fifty, without work for eight months—last worked in October—due to recurrent difficulty regarding back. Sole support wife and wife's sister. One child (Ramon, 27), living on West Coast. Preliminary inquiries fail to locate child.

Remarks: NPH. Examination needed. Is back injury chronic?

There was a great deal of paper work needed, Gloria realized. At first she hadn't liked the paper work at all, but she could see now how necessary it was. After all, everybody wasn't like her; the other workers, she knew, didn't have her particular talent, and they had to write things down for fear they'd forget.

Sometimes Gloria felt very sorry for the other case workers. But she knew they were doing their very best, and they were, after all, helping people. That was the only important thing: to help people, to make them better members of society.

Now, Jose Gironde's back injury was certainly chronic. Gloria tried to remember the medical term for it: it was something to do with a lordosis. She'd paid no attention to that, since she had been trying to fix up the back instead.

But now a doctor had to be called, and a thorough examination had to be given, all so that the records would show what Gloria knew already. A case worker couldn't fill out a medical report; you had to be a doctor to do that.

And it didn't matter, Gloria knew, if you had all the information at your fingertips, and even knew more than the doctor. (Gloria could have cured Jose Gironde's back easily; a doctor couldn't do that.) Examination was the doctor's job.

It was like being a member of a team, Gloria thought.

That felt good.

She got out the list of doctors which all the case workers used, and followed it down with her finger. Dr. Willmarth was free, she knew, on Thursday morning at eleven.

Luckily, Jose Gironde was free at the same hour. She made a note to call the doctor and make an appointment, and to clear the appointment with Jose Gironde, and made a duplicate note on the report sheet.
That would take care of that.
The paper work, after all, wasn't so very hard. All she had to do now was to make the actual calls, and then wait for the written result of the examination. When that had come through, she would be able to recommend Jose Gironde for permanent relief, as was obviously indicated in his case.
The back injury could not be corrected by medical science. And if Gloria were to correct it—
"Your job as a case worker is clearly defined," a teacher had said. "Meddling in another's province, without the permission of your supervisor, is always uncalled-for."
In other words, Gloria thought, the status quo has to be kept. And that, too, made sense when you thought about it.
She looked up to see Harold Meedy smiling across the room at her. She smiled back, very briefly, and went back to her own work.
"Interpersonal relationships within the office framework," a teacher—Mr. Greystone?—had said, "are fraught with danger, and should be handled with the greatest care."
If Harold Meedy wanted to get acquainted with her, that was his affair. She didn't feel that she could conscientiously encourage him in the slightest. Not only was he a fellow worker, which made the whole situation more complicated than it would ordinarily have been, but he was a small pudgy man with pimples and an earnest expression. He looked as if he would be a bore, and a difficult person to get rid of.
He was.
Gloria just didn't think he was exactly her type.
And if he went on trying, she thought regretfully, she would be forced to do something about it. Of course, Meedy would never know the difference, but even so, Gloria didn't like to do any unnecessary work. Changing someone's mind was a delicate job, and a responsible one, not to be undertaken for a small motive.
Even if the person never knew his mind had been changed at all—
Mrs. Wladek, in her apartment, shrugged on an old coat and compressed her lips with weariness. Appointment time was near, and a person had to be punctual.
Even when a person was going to see a young girl who was strange and frightening, and who might do—
Well, don't be a foolish old woman, Mrs. Wladek told herself. Rudi would have told her that. But Rudi was out somewhere, with a girl or with some of his friends, like a good American boy.
Don't be a foolish old woman, Rudi would have said.
But Mrs. Wladek was frightened.
It was nearly ten o'clock, Gloria noticed. She did not feel in the least tired; she was still eager and ready for work. She decided she had time for one more folder before the first of her appointments arrived.
She reached out for it and saw Mr. Fredericksohn coming in the door. He smiled at her, a tall, white-haired man with a square face, who radiated enormous efficiency and a certain distant friendliness.
She did not say hello, but merely nodded. Mr. Fredericksohn liked to take the initiative himself, in all relationships.
"How are we doing today?" he said, peering over her shoulder.
"Fine," she said happily. "Just fine."
Mr. Fredericksohn grunted. "I see Mrs. Wladek's on your schedule today."
"That's right," she said.
"Just do what you can," he said. "You've seen her before, haven't you?"
She nodded. "Once. Last week."
"She's a—problem," he said. Mr. Fredericksohn was always a little chary of saying anything that might be construed as derogatory to a client, even in the privacy of professional conversation.
"I'm sure we'll be able to work things out," Gloria said.
"Well," Mr. Fredericksohn said, and paused. Then he nodded. "You do what you can," he said. His voice sounded doubtful.
She beamed up at him. "I certainly will," she said with enthusiasm.
Mr. Fredericksohn nodded and muttered something, and went on by.
Gloria smiled. Oh, she was going to show Mr. Fredericksohn, all right! He just wasn't sure she could handle Mrs. Wladek—and the old woman certainly did represent a problem. Her folder was full of notations by case worker after case worker. But Gloria's smile broadened just a trifle.
My goodness, everything was going to be all right. She was sure Mr. Fredericksohn would be happy with her work.
Though the important thing wasn't her own success, but the people themselves. If you could help them to be bright, and happy, and successful, then that was the best job in the world.
And she could.
My goodness, yes.

Mrs. Wladek looked at the door for a long time without opening it. She didn't want to go in—certainly not. But there was her appointment, and money was needed; she had no choice. The cossacks of America had forced her to this pass, and she was an old woman; what could she do? Fight them?
One had to give in.
She reached for the doorknob and turned it and opened the door.
There were all the desks, and the men and women working. And near the far corner, on the left, the girl sat studying a sheet of paper. Mrs. Wladek looked at the blond hair and the pretty face and the slight figure, and shivered.
But she had no choice; she went across the room and when she had almost reached the desk the girl said: "Good morning, Mrs. Wladek."

How had she known? Mrs. Wladek had made no sound in walking to the desk. Yet the girl had known someone was there, and who that someone was, before her head had been raised. Truly, the girl was frightening.

Mrs. Wladek eased herself, feeling her bones creak, into a chair at the side of the desk. She said nothing.
"How are things going?" the girl said in her pleasant smooth voice.
"I am fine," Mrs. Wladek said deliberately. She did not inquire about the girl's health. That would show her; that impoliteness would show her what an old woman thought of her!
"That's good," the girl said. "That's very good. And how is Rudi?"
"Rudi is my son," Mrs. Wladek said.
"I know that," the girl said, and smiled. "We met last week, don't you remember?"
"I remember you," Mrs. Wladek said. Then, grudgingly, she added: "Rudi is the same. He is fine."
"That's fine," the girl said. "And has he found a job yet?"

Here it was necessary to lie, Mrs. Wladek knew. One could not say that Rudi did not look for work. One had to say: "Work is difficult to find. He tries, but there is no job."
"And how about yourself?" the girl said.
"I am an old woman," Mrs. Wladek said. "Who would hire an old woman?"
The girl nodded. "It's been a long time since your husband died," she said.
"In an accident with an automobile," Mrs. Wladek said. "I remember that time. It is sad to think of."
"And Rudi hasn't found any work in all that time," the girl said.
"He looks hard," Mrs. Wladek said earnestly. This was a game that had to be played, she knew, a conversation that started and finished each time she came for an appointment. "He looks but work is difficult to find," she said.
"I understand," the girl said. "But I'm sure you and Rudi will both find work soon." She paused and her eyes closed.

Mrs. Wladek felt something happen.
It was ... she felt ... a stirring, a changing—
She stood up suddenly and the chair clattered, balanced and rocked back upright. "What are you doing?"
"Doing?" the girl said.
"I go to look for work," Mrs. Wladek said. "You make me want to look for work!"
"That's fine, Mrs. Wladek," the girl said. "That's just fine."
"But I want to look for work!" Mrs. Wladek said, horrified. "What do you do to me?"
The girl only smiled.
Mrs. Wladek spun and ran for the door, her eyes wide; but she collided with a desk and backed off, and then managed to find her way. The door banged behind her.

Gloria sat at her desk smiling, filled with satisfaction. Of course, a reaction like Mrs. Wladek's was only to be expected, but when it was over she was looking for work.
Gloria released the little doll she had held throughout the interview and let it fall back, out of sight, into her desk drawer. The doll was shaped into a vague female likeness.
She didn't need it now.
Her work was done.

Mrs. Wladek was going to look for work, and that would adjust her to the world. She would be a functioning member of society now, and it would do her a lot of good. Rudi, too—Gloria considered Rudi. There was another doll in the drawer, a male, and after a few seconds she put her hand in the drawer and fished around until she had found it.
She turned it slowly, feeling for the son, until at last she had made contact.
There.
He was talking with some friends; it would not be hard. She concentrated, and at the same time she heard him talking:

"So look, here's the way I see it. We got the Cobras on our necks, we got to get rid of them, right?"

Someone said: "Right, Rudi."

"So if we start a little rumble, very quiet so the cops don't figure what's going on, then we—"

A silence.

Someone said: "What's wrong, Rudi?"

"I don't know. Something. What am I doing just standing here?"

And someone said: "What do you mean?"

"I mean I ought to be out getting a job, man. Earning some bread for the old lady. Got to have money, got to have a job."

Someone said: "Hey, Rudi. Wait. What's the hurry?"

And Rudi had gone.

Gloria dropped the doll and closed the drawer, and sat back, smiling gently. It was wonderful to be able to help people.

It was just wonderful.
Find work. Find a job.
Go to the employment agency.
Start looking for work, right now.
Get a job.
It will be nice to have a steady job.

Nice—

Somehow, Mrs. Wladek fought off the voices in her mind. It was so easy to succumb to them and to drift into the terrible things they wanted. Mrs. Wladek did not want them at all.

A job, indeed!

But it took effort, all the same, to concentrate on herself instead of the work, the job, the employment agency. It took effort to sit down on a bench in the park, near the building where the case workers were, and plan out the next step.

A witch, certainly. The girl was a witch and she had put a hex on Mrs. Wladek, and that hex had to be removed. How?

Mrs. Wladek thought first of the old woman in the store.

Certainly a gypsy woman would be able to take off a hex. Mrs. Wladek remembered gypsies from the old country, laughing people with the strange gift, witches themselves but always available for a price—

The gypsy woman.

Mrs. Wladek stood up and began to walk toward the park's exit. She forced her legs to move, creaking, one step at a time, thinking to herself: The gypsy woman, the gypsy woman, the gypsy woman—and trying to ignore the voices in her head that went on and on:

It would be good to find a job.
Go right away to the employment agency.

Right away—

There were those who laughed—Marya Proderenska thought—and there would always be those who laughed, but that did not injure her; for scoffers she felt only a vast contempt. Had she not been shown in a dream that the power was hers? Had not each of her husbands, even the third who had contracted the fever and died with great suddenness in three weeks, admitted to her that she had a power beyond that of any normal woman? It was the power of vision and movement, the power of spell and incantation.

The others called it magic, though no gypsy would call it so.

Marya Proderenska sat quietly in the back room of the little shop and waited. A woman would come; she knew that, and the knowledge was another piece of her power, and a proof of it. Farther she could not see, but in the cloud of the future the woman was clear.

(What power Marya Proderenska had, a blond social worker had, too, and other people; she had never been able to clear her mind of her own superstitions enough to train the power or work very effectively with it. The power was sufficient for her.)

Marya Proderenska sighed. The power demanded its own responsibilities. She could not marry outside the clan into which she had been born. She could not be seen on certain days of every month. During those days many foods were forbidden her.

Thus the power worked, and thus she lived.
The woman would bring money for her, Marya knew. So she sat in the back of the shop and waited, and sighed, until the front door sighed open and Marie Wladek called: "Old woman, old woman!"

"Do you call me?" Marya said in her proud baritone.
"I call you, I call the gypsy woman."
Marya stood up and smoothed her old dress over the big-boned frame all of her husbands had admired. "Then come to me," she called.
Marie Wladek crept into the room, her eyes saucers of awe. To speak of witches was all very well, and a fresh-faced girl could give one fright; but here was the authority and power of witchcraft, in this woman with the fuzz of hair on her lip and the great trumpeting voice.
"I come for help," Mrs. Wladek said.
"I know why you have come," Marya Proderenska said. "You have a great trouble."
Mrs. Wladek nodded. "I am bewitched. A witch has placed a hex upon me, and I come to you to remove it."
There was a little silence. Then Marya Proderenska said: "The powers will not do work without payment."
Mrs. Wladek dug into her ancient beaded purse and found a crumpled dollar bill. She handed it over and the gypsy woman smiled and ducked her head.
"It is enough," she said.
Mrs. Wladek said: "Then you will help me?"
"I will help you," the gypsy woman said. "Tell me of this curse upon you."
"There is a voice in my mind," Mrs. Wladek said. "The voice tells me—even now it continues—to go to an employment agency, to accept work ... and the voice is not of my making."
"Whose voice is this?" the gypsy woman said.
"It is my own voice," Mrs. Wladek said. "The voice is my own, but I did not tell it to speak. Inside my own head, I can hear my own voice as if someone else put it there."
"Ah," the gypsy woman said. "And who is the witch who has put this curse upon you?"
Mrs. Wladek sighed. "At the office of the social workers, there is one, a young woman. She has done this to me."
Marya Proderenska nodded. Her eyes closed.
Mrs. Wladek stared at the still figure without moving for a minute. Time stretched endlessly. The room was very quiet; Mrs. Wladek heard the continuing voice in her mind and felt fear.
Another minute ticked by.
At last the gypsy woman opened her eyes. "It is a strong curse," she said in a distant voice. "But I have erased it for you. I have taken the hex from you. Is it not so?"
"Taken the hex—" Mrs. Wladek shook her head. "Then why do I still hear the voice?"
"You still hear it?" The gypsy woman muttered under her breath. "Come back tomorrow. We work again."
"Tomorrow is a long time."
The gypsy woman closed her eyes for a second. "All right," she said, and snapped them open. "Four o'clock this afternoon."
"I will be here."
"It is a strong curse."
"You will help me," Mrs. Wladek said.
"I will help you," Marya Proderenska said.
But, after the old woman had left, Marya Proderenska sat alone and her face was troubled. The strength of the curse—she had felt it herself—was enormous. She did not know of any magician who had such power.
She listed over the members of her own clan in her mind, and became satisfied that none she knew was responsible. And yet, the strength of the curse argued real power; was it possible that a power existed within the city, and she did not know of it? Marya felt a cold wind on her back, the wind of fear.
Such a power might do—anything.
And yet it was being used to coerce one useless old woman into taking a job!
Marya Proderenska lay flat on the floor, her arms outstretched. Thus one might gather the vital energies. Four o'clock was not many hours distant, and by four o'clock she would need all of the energy she could summon.
She did not allow herself to become doubtful about the outcome.
And yet she was afraid.
Gloria smiled understandingly at the woman who sat across the desk.
"I understand, Mrs. Francis," she said.
"It's not that Tom's a bad boy, you know," the woman said. "But he's—easily led. That's the only thing."
"Of course," Gloria said. She looked at the middle-aged woman, wearing a gray suit that did not fit her
overweight frame, and a silly little white hat. "I'm sure everything's going to be all right," she said.

Mrs. Francis gave a little gasp. "Oh, I hope so," she said. "Tom doesn't mean to cause any trouble. He just
doesn't understand—"

Gloria went over the report sheets mentally. Tom didn't mean to cause any trouble, but he had been involved in
a gang war or two—nothing in the way of Thompson sub-machine guns, of course, or mortars, just a few pistols and
zip-guns and rocks and broken bottles.

Tom hadn't been killed yet. That was, Gloria thought sadly, only a matter of time. He hadn't killed anybody yet,
either—but he'd come close. Tom had seen the inside of a jail or two a lot more recently than he'd seen the inside of
a classroom.

Tom was easily led.

Sure.

Well, Gloria thought, the problem was to lead him into something more productive and satisfying than the
gangs of New York. And that didn't seem to be too hard.

Of course, she had very little practice as yet. The theoretical knowledge she'd been able to dig up in college was
mostly on the magic and superstition shelves of the library—and, while she got full credit in her minor,
Anthropology, for the research she'd done, a great deal of it just wasn't any practical help.

Not if you were a witch—or what passed for one.

"You see what I mean, don't you?" Mrs. Francis said.

"Of course I do," Gloria said, and gave the woman her most reassuring smile. "I'm sure something can be done.
Do you know where your boy is now?"

Mrs. Francis nodded, birdlike. "He's home now. I think he's sleeping. He usually doesn't wake up until after
noon."

"I see." Gloria hesitated a moment. "Can you describe him for me?"

"Describe him?"

"That's right," Gloria said. "You see, the somatotypes have, we've discovered, a great influence on mental and
emotional makeup."

She didn't feel right, lying to the woman—but chances were that what she'd said didn't make any sense to Mrs.
Francis and, in any case, Gloria could hardly tell her the real reason she wanted a description.

It would aid in making the doll she needed.

"He's about six feet tall," Mrs. Francis said, "but he's very thin, and sometimes I worry about that. I try to give
him the best nourishment I know how, but he—"

"What color is his hair?" Gloria interrupted.

"Oh," Mrs. Francis said. "Brown. And brown eyes. Really nice eyes; they're his best feature; everybody says
so."

"Any distinguishing marks, or anything unusual about him?"

"He has a scar now, on his left arm just below the elbow, but he got that in a fight with these boys—"

"All right," Gloria said. "Thank you very much."

"What are you going to do?" Mrs. Francis said. "You're not going to have him arrested or anything, are you?
Because he's not a bad boy, you know that. He's only—"

"Easily led," Gloria finished. "Of course. There won't be any need for arrest, or for anything as drastic as that.
You just go home now, and don't worry. I'm sure everything's going to be all right."

"I only want to help my boy," Mrs. Francis said.

"Of course you do," Gloria said. "I want to help him, too."

Mrs. Francis stood up and swallowed hard. "I appreciate that," she said.

"It's my job, that's all," Gloria said, feeling unaccountably shy. As the woman left she thought about that
embarrassment and finally decided that she felt she had no right to be complimented. She was doing a job; it needed
to be done; that was all.

True, she had special talents for the job—but Mrs. Francis didn't know that, and she hadn't made the talents
anyhow, but been born with them.

Congratulations?
Don't be silly.

As a matter of fact, Gloria thought, she deserved a good talking-to. She hadn't had enough experience, and that
was the simple truth. It was all very well to work on a boy like Rudi, or another one like Tom Francis, when they
didn't have any idea who you were or even that you were trying to do something. That was easy.

But a woman like Mrs. Wladek—

She was suspicious from the start, and Gloria thought that perhaps she shouldn't have done anything. But it was
obvious that the woman needed help to become a functioning member of society.

The only trouble was that Gloria hadn't been quite expert enough. Oh, given enough time, the command would work, and eventually become part of the personality. But, because Mrs. Wladek had been afraid and a little forewarned, she'd been able to fight off the command a little.

Practice, Gloria told herself, makes perfect. And it wasn't her fault that she couldn't do any better. Next time, she'd have a little more practice and she'd be able to do a clearer and more complete job.

And, in the meantime, there was no real harm done. Mrs. Wladek would come round, before long, and then everything would be all right.

Why, after all, there was Rudi, too. And Rudi undoubtedly had a job by now, or at least a good chance of one through an employment agency.

There was no reason to be depressed.

Her son was waiting for her when she arrived at her home once more. Mrs. Wladek looked at the boy with relief and some suspicion. It was not natural for Rudi to be at home during such an hour; he was out with his friends through the day, and this was good for a boy.

"Ma," Rudi said, "guess what?"

"You are in trouble," Mrs. Wladek said at once, in a heavy voice.

"Trouble? I got no troubles, ma," Rudi said. He stood before her in the dusty living room, self-assured and proud, and it came to Mrs. Wladek all at once that her boy was a man.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Tell me at once."

"Sure I will. Ma," Rudi said. "I got a job. I start tomorrow. In an office, wrapping things. The mail room, they call it."

Silence descended on the little room.

"Ma," Rudi said at last. "Ma, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Mrs. Wladek said. "What should be wrong? Nothing at all is wrong. You have a job, very well, you have a job."

"You're not happy about it, Ma?"

Mrs. Wladek gave a short bark. "Happy? Indeed I should be happy? My son goes to work, like a dog, and I should be—" She paused and gasped suddenly. "Why did you go to work?"

"You mean why did I get a job, Ma?" Rudi said. "Listen, let's have supper and we'll talk about it, huh?"

"Supper?" Mrs. Wladek snorted. "Supper we will have when I find out what I need to know. Not before."

"But I'm hungry, Ma, and ... oh, all right."

Rudi sat down on the old brown couch and sighed. "I just thought it would be a good idea to get a job, bring some bread into the house, you know? So I went down to the agency, and they had this application waiting, and I went down and got the job, and I start tomorrow. That's all. Now let's eat."

"You got the idea to have a job?" Mrs. Wladek said. "Fine. Fine. Just fine. And when did you get this idea?"

"I don't know," Rudi said, and shrugged. "Some time. This morning, maybe. Look, what difference does it make? I thought you'd like the idea, Ma. Some more dough coming in ... you know."

"This morning." Mrs. Wladek raised clenched fists over her head. "Cossacks!" she screamed. "Monsters! Witches!"

Lunchtime.

Gloria looked up and smiled sweetly and distantly as Harold Meedy appeared at her desk. "Got any special place to go?" he said.

"As a matter of fact—" she began, but he was too quick for her.

"It's always 'as a matter of fact,'" he said. "What's the matter—you got another boy friend or something? You don't like poor Harold? Look, Gloria, if you want to avoid me, then you go ahead and avoid me. But—"

"It's nothing like that," Gloria said.

"So come on," Harold said. "Listen, I'm really a sweet guy when you get to know me. You'd like me. Sure you would."

"I'm sure," Gloria said. "But I really do have something to take care of."

"Can't you take care of it later?"

She shook her head.

"Well ... all right, if you want me to grow up all frustrated." He grinned at her and moved away.

When they were all gone, and only Mr. Fredericksohn remained in his private office, behind the closed door, Gloria opened a drawer of her desk and took out a piece of modeling clay a little bigger than her fist. Working without haste, and never bothering to look up she made a doll in the shape of a tall, thin boy.

The voodoo sects in Haiti used hair or fingernail parings from the subject, Gloria knew; she had learned that in her college research, but she had known about the doll long before. Hair and fingernail parings: what superstition!
And it wasn't as if you really needed the doll; if necessary, you could get along very well without it. But it was a help; it made things easier; and why not?

She tried to picture Tom Francis. His mother's description of him had been pretty vague, but Gloria found she could locate him at his house; she turned the doll until she had the feeling of contact, and then—

There.

It didn't take long, actually, not once you had your subject located. Tom hadn't really been a hard case; his juvenile delinquency, Gloria was quite sure, was a thing of the past. He'd be back in school as soon as the details could be worked out between Mrs. Francis and the Board of Education, and that would take care of that.

With a satisfied smile, she put the doll away in her drawer. She'd mash it back into clay later in the afternoon; that would enable her to use the same piece over and over again.

Clay cost money, and a case worker's salary wasn't large. Gloria could not see how she could put the cost of the clay down on a special requisition, anyhow; she had to pay for it herself, and so she was very careful and saving with it.

After she'd put the Tom doll away with the Rudi doll, making a mental note to take care of both of them before she left for the day, she fished out her beret and put it on and went out for a quick lunch.

It was just after two o'clock when Mr. Gerne came in. The others were used to his periodic arrivals, of course, and Gloria had never felt any fear of the director. He didn't work in the same office, but elsewhere in the building, and once a week he made a habit of touring the various social-work agencies under his direction.

It kept the workers on their toes, Gloria imagined: the actual sight of the boss' boss would do that. Mr. Gerne never smiled; he was a small, thin-lipped man with white skin and very little hair. He stood in the outer office, peering round, for a few minutes, and then, nodding his head slowly, he went on and knocked at Mr. Fredericksohn's door.

"Who's there?" Mr. Fredericksohn called from inside.

"Mr. Gerne," said Mr. Gerne. There was a little pause, and then Mr. Fredericksohn said:

"Ah. Come in."

The door opened and shut and Mr. Gerne was invisible.

Gloria picked up a folder and pretended to concentrate on it. Of course, she could hear what was happening in the private office perfectly well. She remembered studying medieval witchcraft and thought suddenly of astral bodies.

But that had been a guess some distance from the truth.

The projection of the sense of hearing was such a simple thing, really; why did people have to complicate it with all this talk about witches and the soul—she was reminded of Mrs. Wladek but put the woman out of her mind. Mr. Gerne was talking.

"... For instance, the new girl—what's her name?"

"Gloria Scott," Mr. Fredericksohn's voice said. "Yes?"

"What's she like?" Mr. Gerne's voice said. "I don't know her personally—of course I've seen her there in the office, and she seems like a friendly, pretty girl. But you deal with her every day—"

"Very nice," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Pleasant and easy to work with. A good type. Now, you take her record—"

"That's what I meant," Mr. Gerne said. "A record like that—it's just not possible. There isn't any chance she's faking it?"

After a little silence Mr. Fredericksohn said: "No chance at all. I've had follow-ups on a random selection of her cases—standard practice for a newcomer. Of course, she doesn't know about any of that."

"Of course. And?"

"No fakes," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "And don't tell me it's hard to believe. I know perfectly well it's hard to believe."

"No returns," Mr. Gerne said. "Not a single return in over a month."

"Except the old woman," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Mrs. Wladek."

Gloria turned a page in the report she was holding, without taking her attention from the conversation in the private room.

It was always helpful to know the kind of thing people said about you, as well as what they thought. It gave you more facts to work with, and made you more efficient and better able to work at your chosen profession.

Mr. Gerne was saying: "You can discount Mrs. Wladek. That one's a trouble-spot."

"Always has been," Mr. Fredericksohn said.

"All right, then discount her," Mr. Gerne said. "Forget about her. And—outside of that one case—there hasn't been a repeat."
“Some of the clients have died,” Mr. Fredericksohn said.
Mr. Gerne waited a second. Then he said: “A little higher percentage than normal. So?”
“I mean, that’s a reason for some of the non-repeats.”
“And the others?” Mr. Gerne paused a minute and then went on. “You can’t discount the girl’s record like that.”
“I wasn’t trying to,” Mr. Fredericksohn said mildly. “I was only pointing out—”
“Let those go,” Mr. Gerne said. “Obviously she had no control over that sort of thing. Unless you think she went out and killed them?”
“Of course not.” Mr. Fredericksohn said.
“And outside of that, then—no repeats. The girl’s a wonder.”
“Certainly,” Mr. Fredericksohn said. “Let’s see how long it keeps up, that’s all.”
Mr. Gerne said: “Pessimist. All right, we’ll drop the subject for now. Anyway, I did want to talk to you about the progress reports we’ve been getting from Frazier’s office. It seems to me—”
Gloria broke the connection. Frazier, a supervisor for another office, didn’t interest her; she only wanted to hear what the conversation about herself would be like. Well, now she knew.
And, thankfully, no one suspected a thing. Why, the subject had been brought up, right in the open, and dropped without a word or a thought.
“Unless you think she went out and killed them.”
Gloria didn’t smile. The idea was not funny. Sometimes you had to do something like that—but the necessity didn’t make it pleasant.
The trouble was that you couldn’t always cure something by a simple projection into the mind. Sometimes you ran into a compulsion that was really deeply buried.
If the compulsion was a big one, and went back far into childhood, Gloria couldn’t do anything directly about it. Sometimes it was possible to work around, and, of course, you did that when you could. The important thing was society, but you salvaged the individual wherever possible.
Where it wasn’t possible—
Well, here’s a man who has a compulsion to get drunk. And, when drunk, he’s got to pick fights. Maybe he hasn’t killed anybody in a fight yet—but some day he will. He’s got the strength and, under the influence of sufficient alcohol, he’s got no inhibitions about using it.
None.
You can let the man live, and by doing that kill an unknown number of other people. At the least, keeping your hands and your mind off the compulsive drinker-fighter will serve to injure others—how many others, and how badly, you can’t tell.
There are times when you’ve got to take an individual life in your hands.
And yet, because you can’t always be sure—
Gloria’s “talents” could kill out of hand, she was sure. But she didn’t use them that way. Instead, she simply projected a new compulsion into the mind of her subject.
The next time he got drunk and wanted to start a fight, he wanted to do something else, too.
For instance: walk along the edges of roofs.
The original compulsion had been added to, and turned into a compulsion toward suicide; that was what it amounted to.
Gloria didn’t like doing it, and she was always glad when it wasn’t necessary. But there was a dark side to everything—even, she thought, helping people.
She told herself grimly that it had to be done.
And then she returned to her work.
Mrs. Wladek pounded on the door of the gypsy’s store a few minutes before four. Her face was white and her lips set in a thin line; she breathed with difficulty and with every move she made she could feel her old bones creak.
It was a shame what was being done to an old woman.
But did they care? Did any of them care?
Mrs. Wladek gave a little snort that was half laughter and half self-pity. She pounded on the door again and dropped her arm, feeling old and tired and nearly helpless.
But she had to fight on.
There was a limit to what an old woman could be expected to stand. They would learn, all of them, what—
The door opened.
Marya Proderenska said: “Yes? You are early.”
“I am in a hurry. Terrible things have occurred.”
The gypsy woman sighed and stepped aside. "Come in, then," she said, and Mrs. Wladek entered slowly,
peering round the front room.

"Come in the back," the gypsy woman said. "I have been preparing to help you. But more is required."

It was Mrs. Wladek's turn to sigh. She reached into her purse and found a fifty-cent piece, which she handed over very slowly.

"More is required," the gypsy woman said, looking at the coin in her hand as if, Mrs. Wladek thought, it was less than a penny. Did not the woman realize that fifty cents was a great deal of money for a poor old woman?

No one had any pity any more.

She handed over another fifty cents and the gypsy woman nodded sadly, pocketed the money and led the way to the back room.

"You will help me now?" Mrs. Wladek said.

"I will try."

The room was silent as the gypsy woman brought all her knowledge and experience into play. Finally she looked at Mrs. Wladek and said: "A very powerful curse has been put upon you. I can't help you."

"The Church will help me!" Mrs. Wladek screamed. "They have the power to exorcise—"

"Do not speak to me of churches," the gypsy woman shouted.

Mrs. Wladek shook her head. "You, who steal my money, who steal the bread from my old mouth without pity—"

"A woman must live," Marya Proderenska said, with great dignity.

The housekeeper had said Father Seador was at supper. This did not make a difference. Mrs. Wladek's problem was certainly serious enough to interfere with any man's supper. Father Seador was overweight in any case; should he miss the entire meal it would not do him any harm. Marie Wladek had a problem, and a serious one; let him miss his supper. It was his job to help people.

But Father Seador would certainly not be in the best of moods.

He was not.

He arrived with his face set in firm lines of disapproval. Mrs. Wladek got up from her chair and curtsied toward him, being very careful of her old bones. He nodded.

"Rudi in trouble again?" he said at once, taking a chair.

Mrs. Wladek sat herself down slowly. When she was settled, she looked over at the middle-aged man. "Rudi has a job."


"So you think," Mrs. Wladek said crisply.

"Well, of course it's good news," Father Seador said. "Responsibility ... steady income ... Mrs. Wladek, I'm sure this has made you very happy, but if you'll pardon me." Father Seador stood up. "I'm in the middle of—"

"Wait," Mrs. Wladek said. "This is not what I have come to talk to you about. It is why he has taken a job. It is why I will be taking a job."

"You?" Father Seador seemed incapable of speech. "Well, I—"

"I am bewitched," Mrs. Wladek said. "A curse is upon me."

"A curse? Well—" Father Seador stopped and cleared his throat. He sat down again. He blinked. At last he said: "What's wrong, Mrs. Wladek?"

"I have told you," she said. "A curse. A curse. I want you to exorcise this witch that has put on me a hex."

"Exorcise? Curse?" Father Seador coughed. "I'm sure you must be mistaken, or—"

"Mistaken? I am not mistaken. I tell you there is a curse upon me."

The parlor was very quiet for a long time. At last Father Seador said: "If you really believe you've been hexed, you'd better give me all the details. When did you feel this ... this curse put upon you?"

"This morning," Mrs. Wladek said.

"And what kind of curse is this? I mean, what effect has it had?"

Mrs. Wladek's voice was as hard as iron. "It has made my son take a job. It has made me want to look for a job. In time, I will not be able to fight the curse, and I will take a job. And then—"

"I don't see anything wrong about that," Father Seador said mildly.

"You see nothing wrong in a poor old woman being forced to work? In a boy forced to grind out his youth among package-wrappers? You see nothing wrong in this?"

"Well, I ... we all have to work."

"Here?" Mrs. Wladek said with astonishment. "Here in America, you believe that? It is not so. My own uncle Bedrich has told me years ago it is not so. Do you dispute the word of my own uncle Bedrich?"

"My good woman," said Father Seador, "look around you ... your friends, your neighbors—"

"Let us say no more about it," Mrs. Wladek interrupted. "There is a curse upon me and I have called on you to
"How do you know this is a curse? Our minds do change, you know, and they do strange things—"

"I have been told," Mrs. Wladek said.

"You've been told? By whom?"

Mrs. Wladek drew herself up in the chair. "By Marya Proderenska, the gypsy fortune teller. She knows that—"

"A gypsy? You consulted a fortune teller?"

"I did."

"Mrs. Wladek, do you know what you are saying ... what you have done? Don't you realize you have committed a sin against—"

But he was speaking to empty air. Marie Wladek was gone.

Gloria looked up at the little clock and sighed briefly. Five o'clock. Another day gone already.

It was a shame, in a way, that time passed so quickly. Gloria didn't feel the least bit tired. After all, she had spent the day in helping people, and that was what made life worthwhile.

But it was quitting time. Staying late would give her the reputation of an eager beaver, and that would make her unpopular. Not that she cared for popularity for its own sake—certainly not!—but you couldn't do your best work unless the others in your office were willing to help you.

Leaving on time was a simple sacrifice to make for them.

She pulled open the desk drawer and got her beret. Then, as she was putting it on, she remembered.

In the other drawer were the clay models.

She opened the drawer and pulled them out. She had barely reduced them to a single amorphous lump when Mr. Fredericksohn passed her desk.

"What's that?" he said. "Clay?"

"A nephew of mine," Gloria said coolly. "He likes to play with clay. I bought some and I'm taking it home."

"Ah," Mr. Fredericksohn said. "Of course. Good night."

And he was gone. Gloria put the clay back into the drawer and reached for her beret.

Harold Meedy called from across the room: "Going home?"

"That's right," she said.

"Can I charter a bus and drop you somewhere?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I've really got to get right home."

"Listen," Harold said. He came over to her desk. "I've been trying to get somewhere with you ever since you walked into this office. Now, what's wrong with me? I haven't been able to get to first base. Don't you like me?"

"Mr. Meedy," Gloria began, "it's just that ... well, I don't believe in inter-personal relations on that level, not in the office. I'm sorry."

He blinked. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," she said.

"But—" He shrugged. "O.K. O.K. I just wanted to know."

The door closed behind him. Gloria felt a little relieved. If matters had gone on the way they'd threatened, why, she might have had to change Harold Meedy's mind for him. Not that it would have done him any harm, but ... well, she just didn't like doing that sort of thing for purely personal reasons.

She was glad she hadn't had to tamper with him at all.

And now it was over, and she could forget about it. Humming under her breath, she put her beret on at last, and gave the stack of folders a pat to keep them absolutely neat, before she left the office.

She still felt a little sad about leaving on time, when there was so much work to be done. But tomorrow, she told herself, she would be able to get back to helping people. Tomorrow—

Tomorrow.

Ten minutes to nine, and Gloria put her beret away, reached for the first folder—and froze.

A second later the door opened. Gloria looked up and smiled helpfully. "Mrs. Wladek," she said. "Is there anything I can do for you? This isn't your day for—"

"It is not my day," Mrs. Wladek said. She closed the door behind her. "This, I know. But I am here. Does this mean anything to you?"

Gloria forced her face to remain expressionless. "Can I help you in any way?" she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You?" Mrs. Wladek barked. "You have done enough. I am not here to see you. But your supervisor, your boss—him, I will see."

"My supervisor?" Gloria looked round. "He isn't here yet."

"He will be here later?"
"Of course he will," Gloria said.

Mrs. Wladek sat down in a chair next to Gloria's desk. "I will wait," she announced. "And you should know that there is nothing you can do to me now." She reached into her bag and brought out a small wooden cross she had brought with her from the old country. She waved it at Gloria wildly.

"Do anything to you? What do you mean, Mrs. Wladek?"

"Hah," Mrs. Wladek said. "You need not pretend with me. This frightens you. No?"

Gloria blinked. "I'm afraid not," she said.

"But ... you are trying to fool me," Mrs. Wladek said. "And I will not be fooled. I wait here for your boss, your supervisor."

There was nothing else to do. "All right," Gloria said.

Everybody stared, of course, but none of the other workers came over to find out why Mrs. Wladek had come in on a day that wasn't her appointment day. With Mrs. Wladek right there, asking questions just wasn't possible. Gloria tried to get some work done, but that wasn't possible either, and she resigned herself at last to sitting quietly and waiting for Mr. Fredericksohn's arrival.

She promised herself she'd make up for the loss of time by taking a shorter lunch hour, and that relieved her mind a little. But she did hope Mr. Fredericksohn would be early.

Thankfully, he was. At nine twenty-five exactly, the door opened and Mr. Fredericksohn entered. He glanced once around the office, saw Mrs. Wladek and went on. A second later he stopped.

He didn't have a chance to say anything. Mrs. Wladek was at his side. "I must see you at once," she said. "I must see you at once."

He stared at her. "Miss Scott here, I'm sure, can—"

"It is about Miss Scott that I want to talk to you," Mrs. Wladek hissed.

Mr. Fredericksohn glanced at Gloria. She busied herself with papers. At last he said: "Come with me," and led Mrs. Wladek down the aisle into his private office. The door closed.

Ten minutes passed and the door opened. Mr. Fredericksohn's head projected. "Miss Scott," he said. "May I see you for a minute?"

The curiosity in the office was almost a solid pressure, but Gloria paid it no attention. She said: "Certainly," put away the folder she had been consulting, and went in.

There, at the side of Mr. Fredericksohn's desk, Mrs. Wladek was sitting, looking determined, grim and baffled all at once. Gloria stood in front of the desk and Mr. Fredericksohn seated himself behind it, the large open window at his back.

"Yes, Mr. Fredericksohn?" Gloria said.

"I have told him all," Mrs. Wladek said. "All. Everything. Total."

"Er... yes," Mr. Fredericksohn said. He faced Gloria resolutely. "Mrs. Wladek has said something about a ... about a spell. Do you know what she might be talking about? Something you said, some impression you gave her—"

"A spell?" Gloria shook her head. "I can't think how she got that idea," she said calmly.

"You do not fool him," Mrs. Wladek said. "He knows. I have told him all."

"Certainly," Mr. Fredericksohn murmured. "But perhaps some little thing—"

"My report will be ready in an hour," Gloria said. "But I'm sure there was nothing."

Mr. Fredericksohn coughed convulsively. "I suppose not," he said. "I realize this is rather unpleasant for you—"

"I quite understand," Gloria said.

Mrs. Wladek came out of her chair in a single movement and clutched Gloria by the left arm. "What is happening?" she demanded.

Mr. Fredericksohn avoided her eye. "Please sit down," he said. And then, to Gloria: "Miss Scott, if you'll make the call ... you know what I mean?"

"Of course," she said.

"The—" He whispered it: "The hospital?"

"What did you say?" Mrs. Wladek demanded. "What did you tell her?"

Gloria disengaged herself and went to the door. As she shut it behind her she could hear Mrs. Wladek's voice, rising to a crescendo of threats and abuse, and Mr. Fredericksohn's calm, scholarly attempts to stem the tide. She almost smiled.

Then she went to her own desk and picked up the telephone.

Actually, she told herself, matters had worked out for the best. Rudi had a job, and would grow into a fully functioning member of society. Mrs. Wladek would not be on the relief rolls any longer.

And what Mrs. Wladek wanted—a place to live, and someone to take care of her—would certainly be provided
for her.

Yes, everything had worked out for the best. And, next time, she'd be able to handle a situation like Mrs. Wladek's with less trouble. Gloria looked into the future—into a long series of days and weeks, helping people, getting them to do what was best for them. Oh, sometimes they wouldn't like it right away, but you had to expect that. What was best for them—

Gloria smiled to herself quietly, and dialed a number.

On the second ring, a voice said: "Bellevue Admitting."

"We'd appreciate your sending an ambulance and attendants right away," Gloria said. "For the psychiatric wards."

THE END
Little though they seem to think of it, the people of this twenty-ninth century live continually in fairyland. Surfeited as they are with marvels, they are indifferent in presence of each new marvel. To them all seems natural. Could they but duly appreciate the refinements of civilization in our day; could they but compare the present with the past, and so better comprehend the advance we have made! How much fairer they would find our modern towns, with populations amounting sometimes to 10,000,000 souls; their streets 300 feet wide, their houses 1000 feet in height; with a temperature the same in all seasons; with their lines of aërial locomotion crossing the sky in every direction! If they would but picture to themselves the state of things that once existed, when through muddy streets rumbling boxes on wheels, drawn by horses--yes, by horses!--were the only means of conveyance. Think of the railroads of the olden time, and you will be able to appreciate the pneumatic tubes through which to-day one travels at the rate of 1000 miles an hour. Would not our contemporaries prize the telephone and the telephote more highly if they had not forgotten the telegraph?

Singularly enough, all these transformations rest upon principles which were perfectly familiar to our remote ancestors, but which they disregarded. Heat, for instance, is as ancient as man himself; electricity was known 3000 years ago, and steam 1100 years ago. Nay, so early as ten centuries ago it was known that the differences between the several chemical and physical forces depend on the mode of vibration of the etheric particles, which is for each specifically different. When at last the kinship of all these forces was discovered, it is simply astounding that 500 years should still have to elapse before men could analyze and describe the several modes of vibration that constitute these differences. Above all, it is singular that the mode of reproducing these forces directly from one another, and of reproducing one without the others, should have remained undiscovered till less than a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, such was the course of events, for it was not till the year 2792 that the famous Oswald Nier made this great discovery.

Truly was he a great benefactor of the human race. His admirable discovery led to many another. Hence is sprung a pleiad of inventors, its brightest star being our great Joseph Jackson. To Jackson we are indebted for those wonderful instruments the new accumulators. Some of these absorb and condense the living force contained in the sun's rays; others, the electricity stored in our globe; others again, the energy coming from whatever source, as a waterfall, a stream, the winds, etc. He, too, it was that invented the transformer, a more wonderful contrivance still, which takes the living force from the accumulator, and, on the simple pressure of a button, gives it back to space in whatever form may be desired, whether as heat, light, electricity, or mechanical force, after having first obtained from it the work required. From the day when these two instruments were contrived is to be dated the era of true progress. They have put into the hands of man a power that is almost infinite. As for their applications, they are numberless. Mitigating the rigors of winter, by giving back to the atmosphere the surplus heat stored up during the summer, they have revolutionized agriculture. By supplying motive power for aërial navigation, they have given to commerce a mighty impetus. To them we are indebted for the continuous production of electricity without batteries or dynamos, of light without combustion or incandescence, and for an unfailing supply of mechanical energy for all the needs of industry.

Yes, all these wonders have been wrought by the accumulator and the transformer. And can we not to them also trace, indirectly, this latest wonder of all, the great "Earth Chronicle" building in 253d Avenue, which was dedicated the other day? If George Washington Smith, the founder of the Manhattan "Chronicle", should come back to life today, what would he think were he to be told that this palace of marble and gold belongs to his remote descendant, Fritz Napoleon Smith, who, after thirty generations have come and gone, is owner of the same newspaper which his ancestor established!

For George Washington Smith's newspaper has lived generation after generation, now passing out of the family, anon coming back to it. When, 200 years ago, the political center of the United States was transferred from Washington to Centropolis, the newspaper followed the government and assumed the name of Earth Chronicle. Unfortunately, it was unable to maintain itself at the high level of its name. Pressed on all sides by rival journals of a more modern type, it was continually in danger of collapse. Twenty years ago its subscription list contained but a few hundred thousand names, and then Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith bought it for a mere trifle, and originated telephonic journalism.

Every one is familiar with Fritz Napoleon Smith's system--a system made possible by the enormous development of telephony during the last hundred years. Instead of being printed, the Earth Chronicle is every
morning spoken to subscribers, who, in interesting conversations with reporters, statesmen, and scientists, learn the news of the day. Furthermore, each subscriber owns a phonograph, and to this instrument he leaves the task of gathering the news whenever he happens not to be in a mood to listen directly himself. As for purchasers of single copies, they can at a very trifling cost learn all that is in the paper of the day at any of the innumerable phonographs set up nearly everywhere.

Fritz Napoleon Smith's innovation galvanized the old newspaper. In the course of a few years the number of subscribers grew to be 80,000,000, and Smith's wealth went on growing, till now it reaches the almost unimaginable figure of $10,000,000,000. This lucky hit has enabled him to erect his new building, a vast edifice with four façades each 3,250 feet in length, over which proudly floats the hundred-starred flag of the Union. Thanks to the same lucky hit, he is to-day king of newspaperdom; indeed, he would be king of all the Americans, too, if Americans could ever accept a king. You do not believe it? Well, then, look at the plenipotentiaries of all nations and our own ministers themselves crowding about his door, entreating his counsels, begging for his approbation, imploring the aid of his all-powerful organ. Reckon up the number of scientists and artists that he supports, of inventors that he has under his pay.

Yes, a king is he. And in truth his is a royalty full of burdens. His labors are incessant, and there is no doubt at all that in earlier times any man would have succumbed under the overpowering stress of the toil which Mr. Smith has to perform. Very fortunately for him, thanks to the progress of hygiene, which, abating all the old sources of unhealthfulness, has lifted the mean of human life from 37 up to 52 years, men have stronger constitutions now than heretofore. The discovery of nutritive air is still in the future, but in the meantime men today consume food that is compounded and prepared according to scientific principles, and they breathe an atmosphere freed from the micro-organisms that formerly used to swarm in it; hence they live longer than their forefathers and know nothing of the innumerable diseases of olden times.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these considerations, Fritz Napoleon Smith's mode of life may well astonish one. His iron constitution is taxed to the utmost by the heavy strain that is put upon it. Vain the attempt to estimate the amount of labor he undergoes; an example alone can give an idea of it. Let us then go about with him for one day as he attends to his multifarious concerns. What day? That matters little; it is the same every day. Let us then take at random September 25th of this present year 2889.

This morning Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith awoke in very bad humor. His wife having left for France eight days ago, he was feeling disconsolate. Incredible though it seems, in all the ten years since their marriage, this is the first time that Mrs. Edith Smith, the professional beauty, has been so long absent from home; two or three days usually suffice for her frequent trips to Europe. The first thing that Mr. Smith does is to connect his phonotelephote, the wires of which communicate with his Paris mansion. The telephote! Here is another of the great triumphs of science in our time. The transmission of speech is an old story; the transmission of images by means of sensitive mirrors connected by wires is a thing but of yesterday. A valuable invention indeed, and Mr. Smith this morning was not niggard of blessings for the inventor, when by its aid he was able distinctly to see his wife notwithstanding the distance that separated him from her. Mrs. Smith, weary after the ball or the visit to the theater the preceding night, is still abed, though it is near noontide at Paris. She is asleep, her head sunk in the lace-covered pillows. What? She stirs? Her lips move. She is dreaming perhaps? Yes, dreaming. She is talking, pronouncing a name his name—Fritz! The delightful vision gave a happier turn to Mr. Smith's thoughts. And now, at the call of imperative duty, light-hearted he springs from his bed and enters his mechanical dresser.

Two minutes later the machine deposited him all dressed at the threshold of his office. The round of journalistic work was now begun. First he enters the hall of the novel-writers, a vast apartment crowned with an enormous transparent cupola. In one corner is a telephone, through which a hundred Earth Chronicle _littérateurs_ in turn recount to the public in daily installments a hundred novels. Addressing one of these authors who was waiting his turn, "Capital! Capital! my dear fellow," said he, "your last story. The scene where the village maid discusses her lover shows your very acute power of observation. Never have the ways of country folk been better portrayed. Keep on, my dear Archibald, keep on! Since yesterday, thanks to you, there is a gain of 5000 subscribers."

"Mr. John Last," he began again, turning to a new arrival, "I am not so well pleased with your work. Your story is not a picture of life; it lacks the elements of truth. And why? Simply because you run straight on to the end; because you do not analyze. Your heroes do this thing or that from this or that motive, which you assign without ever a thought of dissecting their mental and moral natures. Our feelings, you must remember, are far more complex than all that. In real life every act is the resultant of a hundred thoughts that come and go, and these you must study, each by itself, if you would create a living character. 'But,' you will say, 'in order to note these fleeting thoughts one must know them, must be able to follow them in their capricious meanderings.' Why, any child can do that, as you know. You have simply to make use of hypnotism, electrical or human, which gives one a two-fold being, setting
free the witness-personality so that it may see, understand, and remember the reasons which determine the
personality that acts. Just study yourself as you live from day to day, my dear Last. Imitate your associate whom I
was complimenting a moment ago. Let yourself be hypnotized. What's that? You have tried it already? Not
sufficiently, then, not sufficiently!"

Mr. Smith continues his round and enters the reporters' hall. Here 1500 reporters, in their respective places,
facing an equal number of telephones, are communicating to the subscribers the news of the world as gathered
during the night. The organization of this matchless service has often been described. Besides his telephone, each
reporter, as the reader is aware, has in front of him a set of commutators, which enable him to communicate with
any desired telephotic line. Thus the subscribers not only hear the news but see the occurrences. When an incident is
described that is already past, photographs of its main features are transmitted with the narrative. And there is no
confusion withal. The reporters' items, just like the different stories and all the other component parts of the journal,
are classified automatically according to an ingenious system, and reach the hearer in due succession. Furthermore,
the hearers are free to listen only to what specially concerns them. They may at pleasure give attention to one editor
and refuse it to another.

Mr. Smith next addresses one of the ten reporters in the astronomical department--a department still in the
embryonic stage, but which will yet play an important part in journalism.

"Well, Cash, what's the news?"
"We have phototelegrams from Mercury, Venus, and Mars."
"Are those from Mars of any interest?"
"Yes, indeed. There is a revolution in the Central Empire."
"And what of Jupiter?" asked Mr. Smith.
"Nothing as yet. We cannot quite understand their signals. Perhaps ours do not reach them."
"That's bad," exclaimed Mr. Smith, as he hurried away, not in the best of humor, toward the hall of the
scientific editors.

With their heads bent down over their electric computers, thirty scientific men were absorbed in transcendental
calculations. The coming of Mr. Smith was like the falling of a bomb among them.

"Well, gentlemen, what is this I hear? No answer from Jupiter? Is it always to be thus? Come, Cooley, you have
been at work now twenty years on this problem, and yet--"
"True enough," replied the man addressed. "Our science of optics is still very defective, and though our mile-
and-three-quarter telescopes."
"Listen to that, Peer," broke in Mr. Smith, turning to a second scientist. "Optical science defective! Optical
science is your specialty. But," he continued, again addressing William Cooley, "failing with Jupiter, are we getting
any results from the moon?"
"The case is no better there."
"This time you do not lay the blame on the science of optics. The moon is immeasurably less distant than Mars,
yet with Mars our communication is fully established. I presume you will not say that you lack telescopes?"
"Telescopes? Oh no, the trouble here is about inhabitants!"
"That's it," added Peer.
"So, then, the moon is positively uninhabited?" asked Mr. Smith.
"At least," answered Cooley, "on the face which she presents to us. As for the opposite side, who knows?"
"Ah, the opposite side! You think, then," remarked Mr. Smith, musingly, "that if one could but--"
"Could what?"
"Why, turn the moon about-face."
"Ah, there's something in that," cried the two men at once. And indeed, so confident was their air, they seemed
to have no doubt as to the possibility of success in such an undertaking.
"Meanwhile," asked Mr. Smith, after a moment's silence, "have you no news of interest to-day?"
"Indeed we have," answered Cooley. "The elements of Olympus are definitively settled. That great planet
gravitates beyond Neptune at the mean distance of 11,400,799,642 miles from the sun, and to traverse its vast orbit
takes 1311 years, 294 days, 12 hours, 43 minutes, 9 seconds."
"Why didn't you tell me that sooner?" cried Mr. Smith. "Now inform the reporters of this straightaway. You
know how eager is the curiosity of the public with regard to these astronomical questions. That news must go into
to-day's issue."

Then, the two men bowing to him, Mr. Smith passed into the next hall, an enormous gallery upward of 3200
feet in length, devoted to atmospheric advertising. Every one has noticed those enormous advertisements reflected
from the clouds, so large that they may be seen by the populations of whole cities or even of entire countries. This,
too, is one of Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith's ideas, and in the Earth Chronicle building a thousand projectors are
constantly engaged in displaying upon the clouds these mammoth advertisements.

When Mr. Smith to-day entered the sky-advertising department, he found the operators sitting with folded arms at their motionless projectors, and inquired as to the cause of their inaction. In response, the man addressed simply pointed to the sky, which was of a pure blue. "Yes," muttered Mr. Smith, "a cloudless sky! That's too bad, but what's to be done? Shall we produce rain? That we might do, but is it of any use? What we need is clouds, not rain. Go," said he, addressing the head engineer, "go see Mr. Samuel Mark, of the meteorological division of the scientific department, and tell him for me to go to work in earnest on the question of artificial clouds. It will never do for us to be always thus at the mercy of cloudless skies!"

Mr. Smith's daily tour through the several departments of his newspaper is now finished. Next, from the advertisement hall he passes to the reception chamber, where the ambassadors accredited to the American government are awaiting him, desirous of having a word of counsel or advice from the all-powerful editor. A discussion was going on when he entered. "Your Excellency will pardon me," the French Ambassador was saying to the Russian, "but I see nothing in the map of Europe that requires change. 'The North for the Slavs?' Why, yes, of course; but the South for the Matins. Our common frontier, the Rhine, it seems to me, serves very well. Besides, my government, as you must know, will firmly oppose every movement, not only against Paris, our capital, or our two great prefectures, Rome and Madrid, but also against the kingdom of Jerusalem, the dominion of Saint Peter, of which France means to be the trusty defender."

"Well said!" exclaimed Mr. Smith. "How is it," he asked, turning to the Russian ambassador, "that you Russians are not content with your vast empire, the most extensive in the world, stretching from the banks of the Rhine to the Celestial Mountains and the Kara-Koroum, whose shores are washed by the Frozen Ocean, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean? Then, what is the use of threats? Is war possible in view of modern inventions-asphyxiating shells capable of being projected a distance of 60 miles, an electric spark of 90 miles, that can at one stroke annihilate a battalion; to say nothing of the plague, the cholera, the yellow fever, that the belligerents might spread among their antagonists mutually, and which would in a few days destroy the greatest armies?"

"True," answered the Russian; "but can we do all that we wish? As for us Russians, pressed on our eastern frontier by the Chinese, we must at any cost put forth our strength for an effort toward the west."

"O, is that all? In that case," said Mr. Smith, "the thing can be arranged. I will speak to the Secretary of State about it. The attention of the Chinese government shall be called to the matter. This is not the first time that the Chinese have bothered us."

"Under these conditions, of course--" And the Russian ambassador declared himself satisfied.

"Ah, Sir John, what can I do for you?" asked Mr. Smith as he turned to the representative of the people of Great Britain, who till now had remained silent.

"A great deal," was the reply. "If the Earth Chronicle would but open a campaign on our behalf--"

"And for what object?"

"Simply for the annulment of the Act of Congress annexing to the United States the British islands."

Though, by a just turn-about of things here below, Great Britain has become a colony of the United States, the English are not yet reconciled to the situation. At regular intervals they are ever addressing to the American government vain complaints.

"A campaign against the annexation that has been an accomplished fact for 150 years!" exclaimed Mr. Smith. "How can your people suppose that I would do anything so unpatriotic?"

"We at home think that your people must now be sated. The Monroe doctrine is fully applied; the whole of America belongs to the Americans. What more do you want? Besides, we will pay for what we ask."

"Indeed!" answered Mr. Smith, without manifesting the slightest irritation. "Well, you English will ever be the same. No, no, Sir John, do not count on me for help. Give up our fairest province, Britain? Why not ask France generously to renounce possession of Africa, that magnificent colony the complete conquest of which cost her the labor of 800 years? You will be well received!"

"You decline! All is over then!" murmured the British agent sadly. "The United Kingdom falls to the share of the Americans; the Indies to that of--"

"The Russians," said Mr. Smith, completing the sentence.

"Australia--"

"Has an independent government."

"Then nothing at all remains for us!" sighed Sir John, downcast.

"Nothing?" asked Mr. Smith, laughing. "Well, now, there's Gibraltar!"

With this sally, the audience ended. The clock was striking twelve, the hour of breakfast. Mr. Smith returns to his chamber. Where the bed stood in the morning a table all spread comes up through the floor. For Mr. Smith, being
above all a practical man; has reduced the problem of existence to its simplest terms. For him, instead of the endless suites of apartments of the olden time, one room fitted with ingenious mechanical contrivances is enough. Here he sleeps, takes his meals, in short, lives.

He seats himself. In the mirror of the phonotelephote is seen the same chamber at Paris which appeared in it this morning. A table furnished forth is likewise in readiness here, for notwithstanding the difference of hours, Mr. Smith and his wife have arranged to take their meals simultaneously. It is delightful thus to take breakfast tête-à-tête with one who is 3000 miles or so away. Just now, Mrs. Smith's chamber has no occupant.

"She is late! Woman's punctuality! Progress everywhere except there!" muttered Mr. Smith as he turned the tap for the first dish. For like all wealthy folk in our day, Mr. Smith has done away with the domestic kitchen and is a subscriber to the Grand Alimentation Company, which sends through a great network of tubes to subscribers' residences all sorts of dishes, as a varied assortment is always in readiness. A subscription costs money, to be sure, but the cuisine is of the best, and the system has this advantage, that it, does away with the pестering race of the cordons-bleus. Mr. Smith received and ate, all alone, the hors-d'oeuvre, entrées, rôti, and legumes that constituted the repast. He was just finishing the dessert when Mrs. Smith appeared in the mirror of the telephote.

"Why, where have you been?" asked Mr. Smith through the telephone.

"What! You are already at the dessert? Then I am late," she exclaimed, with a winsome naïveté. "Where have I been, you ask? Why, at my dress-maker's. The hats are just lovely this season! I suppose I forgot to note the time, and so am a little late."

"Yes, a little," growled Mr. Smith; "so little that I have already quite finished breakfast. Excuse me if I leave you now, but I must be going."

"O certainly, my dear; good-by till evening."

Smith stepped into his air-coach, which was in waiting for him at a window. "Let me see; I have three hours," Mr. Smith mused. "Jack, take me to my accumulator works at Niagara."

For Mr. Smith has obtained a lease of the great falls of Niagara. For ages the energy developed by the falls went unutilized. Smith, applying Jackson's invention, now collects this energy, and lets or sells it. His visit to the works took more time than he had anticipated. It was four o'clock when he returned home, just in time for the daily audience which he grants to callers.

One readily understands how a man situated as Smith is must be beset with requests of all kinds. Now it is an inventor needing capital; again it is some visionary who comes to advocate a brilliant scheme which must surely yield millions of profit. A choice has to be made between these projects, rejecting the worthless, examining the questionable ones, accepting the meritorious. To this work Mr. Smith devotes every day two full hours.

The callers were fewer to-day than usual—only twelve of them. Of these, eight had only impracticable schemes to propose. In fact, one of them wanted to revive painting, an art fallen into desuetude owing to the progress made in color-photography. Another, a physician, boasted that he had discovered a cure for nasal catarrh! These impracticables were dismissed in short order. Of the four projects favorably received, the first was that of a young man whose broad forehead betokened his intellectual power.

"Sir, I am a chemist," he began, "and as such I come to you."

"Well!"

"Once the elementary bodies," said the young chemist, "were held to be sixty-two in number; a hundred years ago they were reduced to ten; now only three remain irresolvable, as you are aware."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, sir, these also I will show to be composite. In a few months, a few weeks, I shall have succeeded in solving the problem. Indeed, it may take only a few days."

"And then?"

"Then, sir, I shall simply have determined the absolute. All I want is money enough to carry my research to a successful issue."

"Very well," said Mr. Smith. "And what will be the practical outcome of your discovery?"

"The practical outcome? Why, that we shall be able to produce easily all bodies whatever—stone, wood, metal, fibers—"

"And flesh and blood?" queried Mr. Smith, interrupting him. "Do you pretend that you expect to manufacture a human being out and out?"

"Why not?"

Mr. Smith advanced $100,000 to the young chemist, and engaged his services for the Earth Chronicle laboratory.

The second of the four successful applicants, starting from experiments made so long ago as the nineteenth
century and again and again repeated, had conceived the idea of removing an entire city all at once from one place to another. His special project had to do with the city of Granton, situated, as everybody knows, some fifteen miles inland. He proposes to transport the city on rails and to change it into a watering-place. The profit, of course, would be enormous. Mr. Smith, captivated by the scheme, bought a half-interest in it.

"As you are aware, sir," began applicant No. 3, "by the aid of our solar and terrestrial accumulators and transformers, we are able to make all the seasons the same. I propose to do something better still. Transform into heat a portion of the surplus energy at our disposal; send this heat to the poles; then the polar regions, relieved of their snow-cap, will become a vast territory available for man's use. What think you of the scheme?"

"Leave your plans with me, and come back in a week. I will have them examined in the meantime."

Finally, the fourth announced the early solution of a weighty scientific problem. Every one will remember the bold experiment made a hundred years ago by Dr. Nathaniel Faithburn. The doctor, being a firm believer in human hibernation--in other words, in the possibility of our suspending our vital functions and of calling them into action again after a time--resolved to subject the theory to a practical test. To this end, having first made his last will and pointed out the proper method of awakening him; having also directed that his sleep was to continue a hundred years to a day from the date of his apparent death, he unhesitatingly put the theory to the proof in his own person.

Reduced to the condition of a mummy, Dr. Faithburn was coffined and laid in a tomb. Time went on. September 25th, 2889, being the day set for his resurrection, it was proposed to Mr. Smith that he should permit the second part of the experiment to be performed at his residence this evening.

"Agreed. Be here at ten o'clock," answered Mr. Smith; and with that the day's audience was closed.

Left to himself, feeling tired, he lay down on an extension chair. Then, touching a knob, he established communication with the Central Concert Hall, whence our greatest _maestros_ send out to subscribers their delightful successions of accords determined by recondite algebraic formulas. Night was approaching. Entranced by the harmony, forgetful of the hour, Smith did not notice that it was growing dark. It was quite dark when he was aroused by the sound of a door opening. "Who is there?" he asked, touching a commutator.

Suddenly, in consequence of the vibrations produced, the air became luminous.

"Ah! you, Doctor?"

"Yes," was the reply. "How are you?"

"I am feeling well."

"Good! Let me see your tongue. All right! Your pulse. Regular! And your appetite?"

"Only passably good."

"Yes, the stomach. There's the rub. You are over-worked. If your stomach is out of repair, it must be mended. That requires study. We must think about it."

"In the meantime," said Mr. Smith, "you will dine with me."

As in the morning, the table rose out of the floor. Again, as in the morning, the _potage, rôti, ragoûts_, and _legumes_ were supplied through the food-pipes. Toward the close of the meal, phonotelephotic communication was made with Paris. Smith saw his wife, seated alone at the dinner-table, looking anything but pleased at her loneliness.

"Pardon me, my dear, for having left you alone," he said through the telephone. "I was with Dr. Wilkins."

"Ah, the good doctor!" remarked Mrs. Smith, her countenance lighting up.

"Yes. But, pray, when are you coming home?"

"This evening."

"Very well. Do you come by tube or by air-train?"

"Oh, by tube."

"Yes; and at what hour will you arrive?"

"About eleven, I suppose."

"Eleven by Centropolis time, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Good-by, then, for a little while," said Mr. Smith as he severed communication with Paris.

Dinner over, Dr. Wilkins wished to depart. "I shall expect you at ten," said Mr Smith. "To-day, it seems, is the day for the return to life of the famous Dr. Faithburn. You did not think of it, I suppose. The awakening is to take place here in my house. You must come and see. I shall depend on your being here."

"I will come back," answered Dr. Wilkins.

Left alone, Mr. Smith busied himself with examining his accounts—a task of vast magnitude, having to do with transactions which involve a daily expenditure of upward of $800,000. Fortunately, indeed, the stupendous progress of mechanic art in modern times makes it comparatively easy. Thanks to the Piano Electro-Reckoner, the most complex calculations can be made in a few seconds. In two hours Mr. Smith completed his task. Just in time.
Scarcely had he turned over the last page when Dr. Wilkins arrived. After him came the body of Dr. Faithburn, escorted by a numerous company of men of science. They commenced work at once. The casket being laid down in the middle of the room, the telephote was got in readiness. The outer world, already notified, was anxiously expectant, for the whole world could be eye-witnesses of the performance, a reporter meanwhile, like the chorus in the ancient drama, explaining it all _viva voce_ through the telephone.

"They are opening the casket," he explained. "Now they are taking Faithburn out of it--a veritable mummy, yellow, hard, and dry. Strike the body and it resounds like a block of wood. They are now applying heat; now electricity. No result. These experiments are suspended for a moment while Dr. Wilkins makes an examination of the body. Dr. Wilkins, rising, declares the man to be dead. 'Dead!' exclaims every one present. 'Yes,' answers Dr. Wilkins, 'dead!' 'And how long has he been dead?' Dr. Wilkins makes another examination. 'A hundred years,' he replies."

The case stood just as the reporter said. Faithburn was dead, quite certainly dead! "Here is a method that needs improvement," remarked Mr. Smith to Dr. Wilkins, as the scientific committee on hibernation bore the casket out. "So much for that experiment. But if poor Faithburn is dead, at least he is sleeping," he continued. "I wish I could get some sleep. I am tired out, Doctor, quite tired out! Do you not think that a bath would refresh me?"

"Certainly. But you must wrap yourself up well before you go out into the hall-way. You must not expose yourself to cold."

"Hall-way? Why, Doctor, as you well know, everything is done by machinery here. It is not for me to go to the bath; the bath will come to me. Just look!" and he pressed a button. After a few seconds a faint rumbling was heard, which grew louder and louder. Suddenly the door opened, and the tub appeared.

Such, for this year of grace 2889, is the history of one day in the life of the editor of the Earth Chronicle. And the history of that one day is the history of 365 days every year, except leap-years, and then of 366 days--for as yet no means has been found of increasing the length of the terrestrial year.

JULES VERNE

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Contents

INDULGENCE OF NEGU MAH
by Robert Andrew Arthur

In his garden, Negu Mah, the Callisto uranium merchant, sat sipping a platinum mug of molkai with his guest, Sliss the Venusian.

Nanlo, his wife, pushing before her the small serving cart with its platinum molkai decanter, paused for an instant as she entered the shell of pure vitrite which covered the garden, giving it the illusion of out-of-doorness.

Negu Mah sat at his ease, his broad, merry, half-Oriental face good-humored, his features given a ruddy tinge by the light of rising Jupiter, the edge of whose sphere was beginning to dominate the horizon. Sliss, the intelligent amphibian, squatted across from him in the portable tub of water which he carried with him whenever absent from the swamps of his native Venus.

The amphibian's popping eyes turned toward her, the wide frog-face split in a smile of appreciation as Nanlo approached. She refilled their mugs deftly and withdrew. But before she reentered the house she could not resist hesitating to glance toward rising Jupiter and the slim shaft of the rocketship silhouetted now against its surface.

The ship was the cargo rocket Vulcan, newest and swiftest of Negu Mah's freighter fleet. Fully fueled and provisioned, storage space jammed with refrigerated foods that in space the cold of the encompassing void would keep perfectly for generations were it necessary, she would take off in the morning from the close-by landing port for Jupiter's other satellites, then go on to the Saturnian system, returning finally with full holds of uranium for Negu Mah's refineries on Callisto.

She was a beautiful craft, the Vulcan, and one man could manage her, though her normal crew was seven. She had cost a great sum. But Negu Mah was wealthy.

Nanlo's face, sylph-like in its beauty, hardened. Negu Mah was wealthy indeed. Had he not bought her, and had she not cost him more, much more, than the Vulcan?

But no, it was not quite accurate to say that Negu Mah had bought her. However, since time immemorial beautiful daughters had been, if not sold, yet urged into marriages to wealthy men for the benefit of their impoverished families. And though science had made great strides, conquering the realms of the telescope and invading those below the level of the microscope, finding cures for almost every disease the flesh of man was heir
to, there was one ailment it had not yet conquered—poverty.

Nanlo's father had been a rocket port attendant. Once he had been a pilot, but a crash had crippled him for life. Thereafter, his wages had been quite insufficient to sustain him, his brood of half a dozen children, and their hard-working mother.

But Nanlo, growing up, had developed into a mature beauty that rivaled the exotic loveliness of the wild orchids of Io. And in debarking at the rocket port on a business trip to earth, because hurricanes had forced him to land far south of New York, Negu Mah had seen her.

Thereafter—But that is a story as ancient as history too.

It was a truth Nanlo conveniently overlooked now that she had not been unwilling to be Negu Mah's bride. It was true she had driven a sharp bargain with him—her father's debts paid, and sufficient more to ease her parents' life and educate her brothers and sisters. Plus a marriage settlement for herself, and a sum in escrow in the Earth Union bank, should she ever divorce him for cruelty or mistreatment. But that had been only innate shrewdness. She would still have married him had he refused her demands for her family. For his wealth fascinated her, and the prospect of being a virtual queen, even of a distant outpost colony such as that on Callisto, appealed to her.

And she had thought that she was taking little risk, for if she were dissatisfied, the law these days was very lenient toward unhappy marital relationships. It required only definite proof of misconduct, mistreatment, or oppression of any kind to win freedom from an unwanted partner. Nanlo had been confident that after a year or two she would be able to shake free of the bonds uniting her to Negu Mah and take flight for herself into a world made vastly more pleasant by the marriage settlement remaining to her.

But now she had been married, and had lived on Callisto, for a full five years, and her tolerance of Negu Mah had long since turned to bitter hate. Not because he was a bad husband, but because he was too good a one!

* * * * *

There was an ironic humor in the situation, but Nanlo was not disposed to recognize it. Lenient as the law was, yet it required some grounds before it could free her. And she had no grounds whatever. Negu Mah was at all times the model of courtesy and consideration toward her. He granted every reasonable wish and some that were unreasonable—although when he refused one of the latter, it was with a firmness as unshakeable as a rock.

Their home was as fine as any on earth. She had more than adequate help in taking care of it. She had ample time for any pursuits that interested her. But she used it only to become more and more bitter against Negu Mah because she could find no excuse to divorce him.

So great had her bitterness become that, if she could have gotten off Callisto in any way, she would have deserted him. This would have meant forfeiting her marriage settlement and the sum that was in escrow. It would also have left her father in debt to Negu Mah for all that Negu Mah had given him. But Nanlo's passionate rebellion had reached such a state of ferment in her breast that she would have accepted all this to strike a blow at the plump, smiling man who now sat drinking molkai in their garden with their guest from Venus.

The answer to that was—Negu Mah would not let her leave Callisto. The journey to earth, he logically argued, was still one containing a large element of danger. There was no reason for her to visit any other planet, and law and custom required that she look after their home while he himself was away on business.

In this he was unshakeable. There was a stern and unyielding side to him, inherited perhaps from his Eastern ancestors, that left Nanlo shaken and frightened when it appeared. She had seen it the one time she had seriously gone into a tantrum in an effort to make him let her take a trip to earth. It had so startled and terrified her that she had never used those tactics again.

But now, as she wheeled away the molkai decanter and left Negu Mah and Sliss to themselves, joy and exultation was singing in her. Doubly. For she was going to run away from Negu Mah, run away with the man she loved, and in their flight they were going to steal the Vulcan. Thus Negu Mah would be doubly punished. He would be hurt in his pride and in his pocketbook. And all through the Jupiter and Saturn systems, where his wealth, his position, and his beautiful wife were openly envied, he would be laughed at and derided.

Humming lightly under her breath, Nanlo put the molkai decanter away in a little pantry and hurried on to her own apartment. Molkai was a powerful, though non-habit-forming drink. Under its influence one became talkative, but disinclined to movement. Sliss and her husband would remain as they were for hours, leaving her free to do as she would. The servants were asleep in another part of the building, and there was no one to note as she changed her clothes swiftly for a light, warm travelling suit, caught up two small bags, one holding her personal things, the other her jewels, and let herself out through her own private entrance into the darkness of the rear gardens.

Where in the shadows the tall, blonde young engineer, Hugh Neils, was waiting for her....

* * * * *

Negu Mah, when his beautiful wife had left the garden, sighed and put to one side his mug of molkai.

"Sliss, my friend," he said to the Venusian, who was regarding him with large, unblinking pop-eyes, "I am
troubled in my mind. Tonight I must dispense justice. Justice to myself and justice to another. To be just is often to be terribly cruel."

Sliss blinked, once, a film moving horizontally across his large eyes and retracting, to show that he understood. Due to the difficulty of using his artificial speech mechanism, he refrained from speaking until speech was necessary.

"My wife, Nanlo," Negu Mah said heavily, "is unhappy. I have done all that is in my power to make her happy, but I have failed. She has made some requests that I have denied, namely, to be permitted freedom to visit earth. That I denied because I knew the paths she intended to tread would not have led her to happiness either, and I hoped that in the end, here she would find contentment. I have hoped in vain. Tonight she intends to take matters into her own hands."

Sliss blinked again, politely, to indicate that he was interested if Negu Mah cared to tell him more. Negu Mah rose.

"My friend," he said, "if you will come with me, I will show you what I mean."

Sliss grasped the edge of his tub with webbed hands and swung his webbed, yellow-skinned feet free from the water which kept the sensitive membranes from drying, and at the same time supplied his body tissues with liquid. Falling upon all fours, like a great, misshapen pet, he waddled awkwardly after his host.

Negu Mah led him to an elevator within the house. This took them to a higher floor, and there they followed a corridor to the rear of the building. Here Negu Mah, without showing a light, opened a door, and in silence they moved out upon a small balcony overlooking the rear gardens, which were shrouded in darkness because rising Jupiter was on the opposite side of the building.

They had stood there only a moment when below them a door opened, and a small figure slipped through. Another figure appeared from beneath the shadows of a cluster of slender, purple neklo trees and moved forward to greet the first. They met in the center of a tiny open space, where a fountain spurting through holes in crystal made a sweet murmuring music. And to the two watchers rose whispered words--"Nanlo! Nanlo, my darling!" "Hugh! Oh, Hugh, my love, hold me close and tell me that everything is ready for us to leave!"

* * * * *

Hugh Neils' arms held her close, and his lips were hot on hers. That he was here as they had planned meant that he had succeeded in the other plans they had agreed upon. Exultation soared higher in Nanlo's breast.

"Then we can go? Go now?" she asked eagerly, as Hugh Neils released her. "The crew is asleep? You were able to arrange it?"

The young engineer looked down at her, his thin face a pale blur in the darkness.

"In five minutes, just five minutes, Nanlo, my own," he whispered. "I left the guard half an hour ago, drinking molkai into which I put a sleeping powder. Give him five more minutes to fall asleep, then we can go to the ship unseen, unchecked. Until then, we can wait here in the garden."

He led her toward the trilling fountain and they sat down upon a bench before it, of rare Callisto crystal. They still were in darkness, but the flame-like Jupiter light touched the tops of the neklo trees above them with a ruddy light which brought faint glimmerings from the radioactive leaves.

Hugh Neils was a recent college graduate whom Negu Mah had hired as an assistant supervisor in the refining mills on Callisto, where the precious uranium 235 was separated from the ordinary metal. It was not a desirable job, but the best Hugh Neils could get. His college record of reckless scrapes and entanglements with women had been against him. Indeed, this position had only come to him because his home was in the same section as Nanlo's, and Negu Mah had thought that perhaps his company on occasion would help alleviate Nanlo's restlessness.

It had--but to an extent Negu Mah had not foreseen.

"In less than a quarter of an hour, Nanlo my darling," Hugh Neils whispered now, "we'll be gone from here, and you'll belong only to me. We'll leave this infernal barren satellite to spin itself dizzy out here in no place. We'll leave that humpty-dumpty husband of yours and his hypocritical good-nature to whistle for his wife and his ship. We won't care. We'll be together, always together from now on, and he'll never see us again."

Nanlo leaned against his shoulder, the prospect that he painted seemed very sweet to her.

"You're sure you can manage the ship alone?" she asked. "But of course, I can help, a little anyway. You can teach me."

"Of course," Hugh Neils answered confidently, and bent to kiss her again. "I've been studying her for a week, asking questions, making friends with the crew. I can handle her one-handed. We'll take off and circle Jupiter first. They may think we landed on the other side, in the Outlaw Crevice. Or they may figure that we went on to Saturn, and will hide somewhere in the system there.

"But we won't do either, and they won't know where to look for us. Instead of turning back on the other side of Jupiter, we'll make a tangential angle out into space. We'll hold it for a month, for safety's sake. We could hold for
fifty years, or a hundred, if we needed to. There's fuel and provisions, meant for the mines, enough to last that long.

"At the end of the month, we'll swing back, cut into the path of the sun, and pick up Mars as she comes in from behind Sol.

"On Mars, we can sell the Vulcan. There's an outfit in the Equator Zone, in the mountains west of the Great Canal, that will buy her and no questions asked. I learned about them from a fraternity brother while I was in college. He'd run into some hard luck, they gave him a job, and he was making money hand over fist. They're asteroid miners. The work they do is illegal, but it's perfectly justified morally. What right have men with more money than they know what to do with to own everything in the Solar System? How can a young fellow get a start any more, when corporations and rich old fogies own everything?

"Maybe I'll join up with this outfit. After we've sold the ship I'll see. How does that sound to you?"

"Wonderful, Hugh," Nanlo whispered. "But I don't care about that. All I want is for us to be together. Always. You and me, and our love, together for eternity. That's all I want."


Nanlo sighed, with luxuriant happiness, and peered at his radiumite wrist watch.

"The five minutes are up," she murmured. "Can't we go now?"

Hugh Neils nodded.

"We've waited plenty long enough," he decided. "The guard will be asleep by now. The crew were that way when I left them, in the dormitory. I saw that they had plenty of spiked molkai at dinner. Pretended it was my birthday celebration. And the ship's all ready and waiting for the take-off. All we have to do is lock the port and close the rising switch."

The two on the bench by the fountain rose, and for a long minute were locked in an embrace. Then they turned toward the dark-shadowed trees and disappeared beneath them, in the direction of the nearby space port.

* * * * *

Negu Mah silently turned back into the house. Sliss shuffled after him. The uranium merchant led the way back to the vitrite covered garden and there, a little wearily, resumed his seat and picked up his mug again. Sliss climbed back into his tub of water, sighed gratefully at the comfort it gave him, and then turned his pop-eyes toward his host.

He blinked once, inquiringly, and Negu Mah understood that the intelligent amphibian was asking if he intended to do nothing to stop the pair who were running away.

Negu Mah sipped pensively at his drink.

"If she had only told me," he murmured. "If she had only come to me and said she desired her freedom. If they had only both come together and faced me, saying that though it meant giving up all they had, they wanted only each other! I would have been generous. I would have been indulgent. But they did not. They had not the courage. They were afraid of me. And they hated me."

He drained the molkai in his mug, one great gulp, and slumped back.

"The young man, too, Hugh Neils. I thought he would be a companion for her. But he too is weak. Yet they say they love each other. They swear--we heard them--that they want only each other and their love for all time."

Sliss blinked, twice, and Negu Mah nodded.

"Yes," he said. "If they carry out their plans as we heard them, that feeling will soon go. The sale of the Vulcan, even as stolen property, would give them many credits. After that--luxury, self-indulgence. And their natures are too weak to withstand the ravages of such things. So I have been troubled to know what to do.

"You see, my friend from Venus, though I would have let Nanlo go had she asked me, my own honor is at stake when she seeks to deal me an injury by slipping away in the night, and stealing from me the Vulcan. She is doing evil, and must be punished. The young man, too--indulgent as I am, I can not let him dishonor me thus without paying any penalty."
Sliss' eye membranes shut, questioningly. "Yet," the uranium merchant went on, "I have a fondness for Nanlo. I will not prevent her from doing as she has chosen to do, for the intent would still be there, and knowing it as I do, all between us is over. I can not aid her to fulfill her plans, either, for that is to injure her and myself too. But there is another course. I have chosen that."

He gestured with one plump hand toward the silhouetted ship. "I believe they have entered the Vulcan," he announced. "I saw light as the entrance port opened then."

The amphibian's great, frog head nodded agreement. "So," Negu Mah continued, "I have decided to exercise what indulgence I can in the face of the injury they would do me. They shall have their chance."

He fell silent again. Sliss leaned forward in his tub. Both of them watched intently. A flare of greenish light had sprung up beneath the black pillar that was the Vulcan. For just an instant the freighter stood there, green radiance expanding around her. Then she leaped into the sky.

With her leap, she seemed to suck the radiance along. It became a great cone of glowing light that, arrow-like, raced away upward. For a long instant the black length of the ship, and the greenish fan of flame, were outlined against the scarlet background of Jupiter. Then the freighter rocket, flinging herself upward at three gravities or better, passed the edge of the planet and vanished.

Negu Mah sat very quiet for some moments. But at last he stirred again. Sliss' eyes turned toward him, immobile.

"Sometimes love transforms the weak," the uranium merchant said slowly. "Like fire giving temper to soft metal. Sometimes a mutual love will endure for all eternity, and the two who share it will gain from it a soul they did not have before. Nanlo and Hugh Neils have this chance. Both said they wanted only the other, and their love, for all eternity. To gain this, both were willing to cheat, to steal, to dishonor me and themselves."

"So, Sliss, my understanding friend, they have paid the price, they shall have what they ask for."

"As the man, Hugh Neils, said, there is fuel and food in the holds of the Vulcan to run the motors and last the lifetime of a man—or a man and a woman. Indeed, two lifetimes, or three, for I was aware of their plans, and secretly I placed aboard the craft many additional supplies. Fuel, and food, and books, and tools. And one additional thing the two who flee now there in space have not counted upon."

"Into the controls of the Vulcan one of my engineers has placed a small device. After two hundred hours, or when they are well beyond Jupiter, this device will swing the Vulcan straight toward Proxima Centauri, the nearest star. In that position the controls will lock. And for twenty years, a generation, it will be impossible either to alter the course of the Vulcan or to shut her blast motors off."

"At the end of that time the last tank of reserve fuel will be exhausted, and they will cease automatically. Then once more the Vulcan may be controlled by those aboard. They may switch the motors onto the tanks of fuel in the cargo holds, and continue onwards. If they were celestial navigators, they might try to turn, and seek earth again. But they are not navigators, and the sun will be but a tiny spark in the limitless darkness, one with a million others, not to be told apart. They will know that only Proxima Centauri in all space may the Vulcan hope to reach in their lifetime, or perhaps even in that of their descendants, for a message to that effect they will find presently."

"So it may be that they will continue onward of their own choice. If they make no choice, momentum will carry them onward, perhaps forever."

"But in any case, Nanlo and Hugh Neils will have exactly what they have asked for—each other, for all eternity. If truly that was what they wanted, a great destiny may be theirs. A lifetime of travel can bring them to the stars. They or their descendants can be the first humans to bridge the gap of nothingness that has thus far daunted the stoutest hearts."

As they watched, the green dart of light dwindled and was gone. And quite invisible at last in the arms of outer darkness, the Vulcan sped its two passengers onward toward the stars.
It was the lack of sense in the ad that made him go back to it again. He was having his breakfast coffee in the cafeteria next to the midtown hotel where he lived. The classified section of the New York Times was spread before him.

WANTED: Live wire Real Estate broker--No selling--30-40. Room 657 Silvers Building--9-12 Monday morning.

The ad made no sense for several reasons. One: you just don't go around advertising for brokers with four pages of them in the classified phone book. Two: how can one be a live wire broker, without having to sell? Kevin Muldoon shook his head. Just no damn sense. The Silvers Building--H'm! Not too far off. He looked at his strap watch. Fifteen minutes of nine. He could walk it in that time.

"Don't be a fool," he said to himself. "It's obviously a come-on of some kind."

He got up, paid the check and went out. It wasn't till he was on Third Ave. that he was conscious he had started to go crosstown when his office was in the opposite direction. He smiled wryly. Might as well investigate, he thought. Can't do any harm, and it won't take long.

There were four others waiting in the small anteroom. The outer door bore no legend other than the room number, and the inner door was blank altogether. Muldoon made a quick appraisal of those waiting. Three were obviously past middle-age, the fourth about Muldoon's age. The inner door opened and Muldoon looked up. A tall man came out first, a man in his early sixties, perhaps. Immediately behind him came a slightly shorter man, but very heavy and with a head that was bald as a billiard ball. The older man marched straight to the door, opened it and went out without a second look back. The fat man looked around, his face beaming in a wide smile, eyes almost closed behind fleshy lids.

"And now, who's next?" he asked.

The one who was about Muldoon's age stepped forward. The fat man motioned for the other to precede him. The door closed. Not more than a minute went by, and the door opened again and the same act as before with the older man was gone through.

"And now, who's next?" the fat man asked.

Muldoon noted even the inflection was the same.

So it went with the three who were left, until it was Muldoon's turn. And now there were six others beside himself also waiting to be interviewed.

It was a squarish room, simply furnished, with a couple of desks set side-by-side with a narrow space between them. A chair was set up facing the desks, obviously meant for the one to be interviewed. Seated behind one of the desks was the twin of the man now coming to seat himself at the other desk. Their smiles were identical as they waited for Muldoon to make himself comfortable.

For a moment there was a blank silence. Muldoon studied them, and they, smiling still, studied him. Muldoon broke the silence.

"You know," Muldoon said, "your ad didn't make sense to me."

The twins hunched forward slightly at their desks. Their eyes brightened in anticipation. "No-o?..." said the one who had been waiting for Muldoon. "Why?"

"With some four pages of brokers in the classified directory, you don't have to advertise for one. And a live wire broker gets that reputation as a salesman. Without selling, the wire is dead."

The twins beamed at each other.

"Evin," said the one to the left, "I think we've found our man. Will you go out and tell those waiting?"

They waited for the twin to return.

"I am Robert Reeger, my brother Evin," said the first twin.

Muldoon introduced himself. There was no handshaking.

"You are right about the ad," Robert Reeger said. "We worded it that way for a reason. We wanted a man of quick intelligence. Mind you, now, we do want a broker, and one who will do no selling. The 'live wire' part was my brother Evin's thought. He does sometimes have clever ideas."

Robert stopped to beam at his twin. "Just now," Robert returned to Muldoon, "I won't go into full discussion of our plans. Briefly, however, we are buyers, buyers, we hope, of a particular area. Because of what we have in mind to do we would rather it was done quietly and without any publicity. Had we engaged the services of a large agency this would not be possible, for, if I may coin a phrase, the trumpet must blow strongly to announce the coming of genius." He smiled, stroked his chin, looked up at the ceiling and his lips moved silently as if he enjoyed repeating the phrase.

"I like that, Robert," Evin said.

"Yes, I thought it was good," Robert said.
They both looked to Muldoon.
Muldoon said nothing.
The twins sighed audibly, in unison.
Robert's lips came forward in a pout. The look of a pouting cherub, Muldoon thought, one trying to look stern, and only succeeding in looking naughty-childish. Muldoon suddenly knew of whom the twins reminded him. Twin Charles Laughtons, without hair.
"You are free to work for us?" Robert asked.
"With you," Muldoon said. "I have the license." He gave them a quick smile, as if to lessen the sharpness of the tone he had used. "A broker acts for a client in the purchase or sale of property. He can't be employed by them."
"Of course," Robert said quickly. "I did not mean to imply any other action. Now suppose you tell us briefly about yourself."
Muldoon gave them a thumbnail sketch of his career. He noted their pleased look that he was a one-man agency. At the conclusion, Robert stood up and came around the desk. He thrust a hand at Muldoon.
"I do believe," Robert said as he placed a heavy arm around Muldoon's shoulder, and walked him to the door, "that we shall have a mutually happy relationship. You will not be unrewarded, moneywise." He opened the door, paused, still with his arm around Muldoon, and looked steadily into Muldoon's eyes. "Yes, I think there will be mutual benefits in our relationship. Now, in conclusion, will you pick us up at this office tomorrow morning at nine?"
Muldoon nodded.
"Good! Then 'bye now, Mr. Muldoon, and thanks so much for coming by in answer to our ad."
The answer to an irritating thought came to Muldoon while he was waiting for an elevator to take him to the ground floor. He knew where he had seen the same kind of look as was in Robert Reeger's eyes when they had parted. In the eyes of a cat Muldoon had once seen toying with a mouse the cat had caught....
Deena Savory was a redhead, a green-eyed redhead with a kind of patrician look about her face that came off very well in the photographs they took of her. Deena was a model, and made three times the money Kevin Muldoon made.
It had always been a sore point between them, and more than once the reason for their worst quarrels. She was also the worst cook in New York. Monday evenings were spent in Deena's small apartment on East Fifty-Sixth Street, and she usually cooked dinner for Muldoon. Invariably it was steak. Deena had no imagination when it came to food. Even in restaurants she ordered one or another kind of steak.
They were together on the couch, she stretched full-length, her head in Muldoon's lap. He was telling her about the Reeger twins and what had happened that morning. His hands caressed her lightly as she spoke, now across her cheeks, now more intimately.
"... I don't dig them, Honey," he said, as if in recapitulation. "The Robert twin, f'r instance, You will not be unrewarded, moneywise. Madison Avenue and Nineteenth Century English...."
She gently took his hand from where he seemed to find most comfort, and put it up to her cheek. "What's the difference?" she asked. "So long as there's money in it?"
"Broker's commission," he said. "No more or less."
"You've been getting so much of that, lately?"
"N-no."
"Okay, then. Stop fighting it. What do you care what kind of English they use? Or whether they used sign language. The buck, kid, the buck."
"Deena," Muldoon said gravely, "you have the grubbing soul of a pawnbroker. Or real estate broker," he added. He bent his head and kissed her lips.
Her lips opened to his with that familiar warmth, a hunger for him which never failed to thrill. This time she did not remove his hand when it returned.
"... Kevie, baby--darling ... oh, my darling," she whispered.
Strange, he thought, that at a moment like this, I should be thinking of those fat twins....
* * * * *
Muldoon hated the pirate prices of midtown parking lots, and so was late. It had taken him ten minutes to find parking space for the Plymouth. As he started to open the door of room 657 he heard the voice of one of the twins. The words or sounds were in a language completely foreign to him. He thought to knock, but changed his mind. To knock would have made it obvious he had been listening. He barged right in.
The twins were in the anteroom. Muldoon got the impression they knew he had heard them, and an even
stronger impression, that the fact was of no importance. That bothered him, for some reason.

"Ah, there you are," the twin to the left said. "Evin was wondering whether you would show up, but I told him he was putting himself to useless aggravation."

That damned mixed-up phrasing again, Muldoon thought. " Took a little time to find parking space," he said.

"All right with me," Muldoon replied. There was another odd thing. Evin Reeger seemed to have so very little to say.

Their destination was a place halfway down the Island. Muldoon's brow had lifted when they gave him the area. So far as he knew there hadn't been any development in the area. It was just a bit too far off the highways and rail lines for housing developments, and even more badly located for industrial requirements. He wondered what the devil they had in mind out there.

Traffic was light and the drive took little more than an hour and a half on the main highway, and another fifteen minutes of blacktop side road before Evin told him to "Turn left here," onto a rutted path off the blacktop. The path led through some scrub growth that ended on the edge of an acre or so of dump heap. Rusted heaps of broken cars were scattered about. A foul odor came from the left as though garbage, too, had been dumped and left to rot. There was a flat one-storied wooden shack close by to which Evin directed him to drive up to.

* * * * *

Evin produced a key and opened the door to the shack. There was a partition separating the place neatly into two sections. There were a couple of straight-backed wooden chairs and a leather sofa in the near room. The door to the other room was closed.

"Sit down, Muldoon," Robert Reeger said. He waited for Muldoon to make himself comfortable on the sofa, then continued: "First time we've ever been out here during the day. But Evin's sense of direction is unfailing." He shook his head, smiled brightly. "Ah, well, we must each have some factor to make for validity of existence, eh?"

"I don't follow," Muldoon said.

"No matter. Now, to the business at hand. I wanted you to see the area involved. Evin, the plot plan, please."

To Muldoon's surprise Evin Reeger went into the next room and returned after a moment with a plot plan of the lower third of the Island. He gave it to Muldoon who spread it at his feet.

"That red-pencilled area I've marked off," Robert Reeger said, "is what we'll be concerned with. As you notice, the dump and this shack are at the approximate center. What I have in mind to do is buy all the land in the marked-off area."

"Buy it!..."

"You seem surprised."

"Shocked, would be the better word. Have you any idea what this could cost? You've marked off an area of approximately a square mile. Even out here that would run into millions. And once news got around that someone was buying parcels of this size--well, you'd have more publicity than you might want."

"About the cost we won't worry. There will be enough money. But the attendant publicity could mean not being able to get the land we want. Is that correct?"

"Could be. Suppose we get options, or leases on these pieces...."

"That was a good phrase," Evin broke in unexpectedly. "Don't you think so, Robert?"

"Yes!" Robert said sharply. He seemed to have suddenly lost his smile. He gave Evin a hard look from under down-drawn brows. He turned to Muldoon. "We are renting this, this tumbledown structure. A two-year lease. H'mm! I see your point. Spending millions in a sudden buying move would make unneeded difficulties. No! Options to buy, but lease for the present. Evin, the list of names, please."

Evin didn't have to go anywhere for the list. He had it with him. Muldoon looked it over. There were thirty-three names, including the County and State.

"Well?" Robert said.

"I'll have to know what you want to lease it for, the name or names of corporations, and so forth."

"Will my own name do?"

"Yes. Let the leases come under my own name. As for what I intend doing, well, I intend to concrete surface the entire area."

"A square mile of concrete?..."

"Yes. There is a government plan to use this end of the Island for a huge missile depot. They will have to come to me."
Pretty shrewd, Muldoon thought. That is if it's true. "All right," Muldoon said. "When do you want me to start?"

"Right now. That was one reason for bringing you out here. Evin, will you get the brief case, please?"

Once more Evin Reeger went into the other room. And closed the door carefully behind him when he came out. He handed the brief case to Muldoon.

"You may open it," Robert said.

Muldoon's fingers became suddenly nerveless, and he dropped the brief case. It was crammed with money, packets of hundred-dollar bills.

"There are fifty packets of hundred-dollar bills, totalling a million dollars," Robert said.

"What the hell did you want me to do, carry the case around with me?" Muldoon asked.

"No. It will remain here. I merely wanted to show you I will be able to stand behind any price you may have to meet. From now on report here, no matter what time. And, since time has a definite value in this matter, do not stand upon it."

"I like that," Evin said, suddenly. "That was good, Robert."

Muldoon nodded. Evin had a value, too. The same value any yes-man has. But it bothered Muldoon. This just wasn't the way of twins. At least none he knew. Well, one thing was certain; the Reegers had the ready cash....

"This may take some time," Muldoon said. "Weeks, certainly, maybe months. The County and State, alone...."

"We don't have that much time," Robert broke in. "Evin must return in ten days...."

"Return? Where?" Muldoon asked.

It was as if Robert hadn't heard. "The State and County properties are small areas, and on the very edge. Suppose we forget about them for the time being. Work on the private parties."

"Anything you say. But it may still take weeks."

"Then don't quibble. Lease at any price. If a show of cash is necessary, let me know. Now I think you'd better start. Good luck, Muldoon."

It was Wednesday night before Muldoon saw Deena Savory again. Nor had he seen the Reeger twins since leaving them Monday morning. Deena and Muldoon seldom saw each other during the middle of the week; they were her busy days and she needed the nights for complete rest. But he had called her and asked to see her. They were at dinner in a small Italian place close to her apartment.

He had briefly brought her up to date on what had happened since she had seen him last, and was at the moment finishing the last of the lasagna he had ordered.

"They're phonies, honey, real phonies," he said. "I'll bet my last buck on that."

She was looking at the last piece of steak on her plate. With an almost defiant gesture she speared it and put it in her mouth.

"Atta girl," he said.

"Mind your own business," she said. "How do you mean they're phonies?"

"I spent all Monday investigating them!"

"A fine way to make a dollar," she said. "What do you care who they are?"

He gave her a knowing smile. "That's my fat-headed girl. Like to visit me in a nice jail, wouldn't you? One with a prestige address, of course. Let me tell you. They rented that shack, and the dump heap next to it for a pretty fancy figure. Robert Reeger said they were going to do printing in that shack. They paid in full for the two years rental, in nice crisp hundred-dollar bills...."

"I get it! They werephony," she exulted.

"How can you be so stupid? I know. For you it's easy. Of course the bills were genuine. But the printing business--what were they going to print with, typewriters? Another thing. There's no business record I could find on them; they're not listed. So how did they get a million dollars, and Robert said more. 'Report here, no matter what the time.' I don't get it. I drove them out. There was no garage, no car I could see, and the place is miles from food. How do they live out there?"

"Maybe they have friends who pick them up," Deena said.

"Maybe. Robert also said there was a rumor or something about the government going to use the area for a missile depot. I tried to run it down. Nothing."

"Which proves nothing," she said.

"True. But I couldn't even smell smoke. No, the whole thing just smells bad. So I think I'm going back there and tell them to forget it."

"Oh, don't be an idiot," she said. "This is your big chance to make some real money, get a reputation, and
because you're chicken, you're going to throw it up."
"I won't get into anything crooked!" his voice rose.
"The way you're thinking you couldn't follow a straight line."
"They can't draw a straight line."
"Well, you do what you want. Only, the next time I have to pay for a dinner don't give me that martyred look."
"Okay. Okay. What do you want for dessert, spumoni?"
"After this, bicarbonate."
"Very funny."
And for the first time in several years she did not kiss him good night, when they parted.

* * * * *

He turned off the blacktop and started down the rutted path. He switched the headlights off about halfway to the shack, and parked it a hundred or so yards away from it and walked the rest. The shack was dark.

Instead of knocking, Muldoon walked around to the back and peered through the single window at the rear. He could see nothing. Now isn't this just dandy, he thought. Drive all the way out here, and nobody's at home. Damn! He went around to the front and started back to the car. His attention was caught by a greenish glow of light from the far end of the dump heap.

His curiosity aroused, Muldoon warily made his way through the metal litter until he was close enough to make out the source of the light. It came from the center of a shallow area that had been cleared of rubble. A rusted misshapen mass of metal lay in the center of the cleared space. The greenish glow was coming from an opening in the mass.

Muldoon crept closer until he was able to make out details. Not too many but enough to give him an idea of the size and general shape of the thing. But what really held him were the figures of Robert and Evin Reeger.

He saw them quite distinctly.

One of the twins was bent over a machine of some sort. There were levers, gears, and rollers mounted on a webbed platform no larger than a rather oversized typewriter. Muldoon's eyes went wide at the sight of the greenbacks coming in a steady stream from the interior of the machine and falling into a box at the side. He could see very little else that was in the room, other than the brother of the twin at the machine. He was on the far side of it, fiddling with something hidden.

Muldoon stared in fascination for another minute, then carefully made his way back to the car. He had parked it within the growth of scrub trees and bushes. He started it, turned the headlights on, and drove slowly out into the open and up to the shack. He honked his horn loudly a couple of times and got out of the car and walked up to the shack and tried the door. It was closed.

Presently the figures of Evin and Robert Reeger came into view from the direction of the dump heap. Muldoon's figure was outlined in the glow of the headlights. Muldoon noticed the brief case one of them was carrying.

"Ah, there, Muldoon," Muldoon had recognized Robert's voice.
"Hello, Mr. Reeger. Thought I'd come by and let you know how I've been doing."
Evin, who was carrying the brief case, unlocked the door and switched on the light. The other two followed him into the room. Robert Reeger motioned for Muldoon to take the sofa. Evin went into the other room.

"Well, my boy," Robert said heartily. "How is it going?"
"Slowly," Muldoon said casually. "But the first of this sort of operation has to go that way. Kind of feel things out, if you know what I mean?"

"Of course. How does it look?"
"I think it's going to go all right. I've got plans."
"Splendid! Do you need money?"
"Yes. About ten thousand."
"Evin! Do bring the case out," Robert called loudly.

In a couple of seconds, Evin Reeger appeared. He brought the brief case to his brother, turned, and went back into the other room without saying anything. He walked slowly and stiffly, his feet slapping heavily on the bare boards.

"What's wrong with him?" Muldoon asked.

Robert Reeger was pulling money from the brief case. He looked up with an expressionless face. "Nothing. You said ten thousand?..."

"Yes."

Reeger passed two of the packets to Muldoon. "Sure you won't need more?"

Muldoon put the money away, got up from the sofa, and started to the door. "No. Just what I need. Uh, I'll see
you Friday night."
"Fine! And don't forget. We must get all this done quickly."
"I won't forget."

Robert Reeger waited till the sound of the Plymouth was no longer heard. Then he went into the other room. Other than for two army cots the room was empty. Evin was stretched full-length on one of the cots.

"You're certain he knows?" Evin asked.
"Yes. I saw him on the visio."
"But he couldn't see all the interior?"
"No. Just the duplicating machine. We must get rid of it tonight."
"What do you think he will do?"

"What can he do? He knows nothing. The money is genuine, and with the destruction of the machine he can't prove anything. Nevertheless it might be the wisest course to get rid of him. We might have been too clever with that advertisement."

"Possibly. But, we must move quickly, then. I must leave this planet in seven days now. And we must have this area under lease by then. Three musts!"

Robert smiled thinly. "We will. If not through Muldoon, then through another means. When you return in a year with the space fleet you will find the landing area we need."

"And after that ..."
They smiled at each other.
"We said we would not fail. This planet will fall to our weapons like ripe fruit from a tree."

"But first I must return to tell them," Evin said. "If I do not return they will know we have failed, and will seek another planet."

"We won't fail," Robert reiterated. "Right now, let's get back to the space ship and the duplicating machine."

Muldoon spent a busy Thursday. A newsbrief in the Times financial section which told of a public utility wanting Island property gave him an idea for one thing. He spent all morning bringing the idea to a head, after he had verified the truth of the item. Then, after a late lunch, he went to the Treasury Department's headquarters and spent a couple of hours with the head of the local investigation department.

He was quite pleased with himself by nightfall, as he headed out to the Island. This time he parked the car at a considerable distance from the shack. There were lights on, this night. He walked boldly up and knocked at the door.

It opened wide and the thick figure of one of the twins darkened the opening.

"Well, Mr. Muldoon. I did not think to see you till Friday."
"I thought I'd come and see you tonight," Muldoon said as he stepped into the room.
"I didn't hear the car."
"Oh. Parked it back a bit," Muldoon said. He turned toward the other twin as the inner door opened. "Hello."
"Hello."

"You know, Evin," Robert said, "I'm rather glad Muldoon stopped by tonight. We might as well conclude our business with him now."

"An excellent idea, Robert. Excellent."
"What do you mean?" Muldoon asked. "I no longer am acting for you?"
"Not for us, for yourself. I'm afraid your services, in any capacity, will no longer be needed."

Muldoon caught the undercurrent of menace in Robert's voice. It told him they were not only suspicious but ready to act on it. He started to edge toward the door, but Robert suddenly reached out and took his arm. There was power in the fat man's grip. Evin moved swiftly for his size, and took up a position before the door, which he kicked shut.

Muldoon twisted sharply and was free of the other's grip. He stepped back a couple of paces. "What the hell's this all about?"

"Come now, Muldoon," Robert said softly. "You didn't think your prying went unobserved, last night?"

"So I was nosey. But what's this rough stuff you're trying to pull?"

"Merely making sure your curiosity will end tonight."

Muldoon took a couple of more retreating paces. "You mean you're going to get rid of me? Well, maybe you will, and maybe you won't. But even if you do ..."

A smile broke through the grim lips of the twin threatening Muldoon. "You mean the duplicating machine? Just another piece of rusted scrap among the rest of the junk."
Muldoon paled. The evidence he was going to need, gone. 
"And of course the money is genuine. We made sure of it. Ink, paper, everything. We made sure of it long ago. It will be a pity you won't be here to see how efficient we can really be. But the rest of the planet will know. As soon as Evin returns."

Muldoon's mind was working swiftly. "You got rid of the machine. But what about the junk shop it was in. I'll bet there are more important things there."

"Indeed there are. But no one will find it. It will be just another rusted piece of large junk to them."

It was then Muldoon made his move. He lashed out with a fist. The blow staggered Robert. And Muldoon was crashing his shoulder against the inner door. It burst inward, but before he could get through Robert grabbed him. The whole side of Muldoon's face went numb as Robert crashed his fist against his jaw. Muldoon knew he didn't stand a chance in a straight-up fight, not with these two. Robert's hands were reaching for him, now.

Muldoon grabbed one of the hands with both of his, twisted outward as he grasped two fingers in each hand. Robert's face went putty-grey as the bones snapped. Muldoon no longer cared about fair play. His knee came up where it could do most damage, and Robert sank grovelling to the floor.

Muldoon whirled. Too late. The world exploded in a thousand flashes of pain-filled lights. He went crashing backward into the wall. Evin hit him again before he stumbled blindly away from the terrible fist.

"Let me kill him," Robert groaned.

Muldoon pulled himself up from the pain-filled world he had been sent into. There seemed to be two Evins facing him. Then there was only one. A twisted grin came to Muldoon's lips. "Come ahead, you rat," he mumbled.

Evin came forward. And swift as an adder Muldoon kicked him just below the knee cap. Evin screamed, and collapsed. Muldoon staggered out of the way of the falling body, only to fall into the clutches of Robert's sudden reaching fingers.

He fell to the floor.

Robert tried to get his good hand up to Muldoon's throat. Muldoon beat at the thick face with both hands. But the other seemed not to feel the pounding fists. Slowly the fingers managed to reach their goal. Muldoon felt the darkness of death closing over him as his breath became a tortured dying gasp. His hand found Robert's face, came gently over it until his thumb pressed on one eyeball. And Robert screamed as the thumb became a hooked instrument to blind him.

Muldoon rolled away from the other, staggered somehow erect, but knew his strength was gone. He couldn't make it to the door. And now Evin had him....

And the door burst open and men poured into the room. Muldoon recognized only one, the head of the Treasury's investigation department, before he blacked out.

* * * * *

Deena Savory stroked his forehead gently. "Does it hurt much, baby?"

The nurse had left them alone when Deena came into the hospital room.

"Not now," Muldoon said.

"What are they going to do to those men?" she asked.

"Oh, twenty years, according to Phillips. Counterfeiting, you know, carries heavy penalties."

"But I thought the money was good? After all, they had paid rent with C-notes."

"A slip-up on the bank's part. You see they made one mistake. The machine they had, turned out perfect bills. Every one with the same serial number...."

Deena's eyes widened.

"And the junk shop or whatever it was?" she said.

"I thought I'd let well enough alone. You see I took care of that during the day. The twins, being criminals, had automatically broken their lease. They also made it possible for me to change clients. Well, there's going to be a huge tank covering that dump and shack, a tank holding an awful lot of natural gas. I got together with the owner of the property and the utility people yesterday afternoon and worked out a deal. They're going to dump all that junk into the ocean."

"I'm sorry about the other night," she said suddenly.

"Is that how you say you're sorry?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," she said, as he reached for her. "There's a time and place for that."

"Promise."

Her lips agreed.

THE END
LOST IN TRANSLATION
By Laurence Mark Janifer

In language translation, you may get a literally accurate word-for-word translation ... but miss the meaning entirely. And in space-type translation ... the effect may be the same!

The cell had been put together more efficiently than any Korvin had ever been in. But that was only natural, he told himself sadly; the Tr'en were an efficient people. All the preliminary reports had agreed on that; their efficiency, as a matter of fact, was what had made Korvin's arrival a necessity. They were well into the atomic era, and were on the verge of developing space travel. Before long they'd be settling the other planets of their system, and then the nearer stars. Faster-than-light travel couldn't be far away, for the magnificently efficient physical scientists of the Tr'en--and that would mean, in the ordinary course of events, an invitation to join the Comity of Planets.

An invitation, the Comity was sure, which the Tr'en would not accept.

Korvin stretched out on the cell's single bunk, a rigid affair which was hardly meant for comfort, and sighed. He'd had three days of isolation, with nothing to do but explore the resources of his own mind. He still didn't show any particular psi talents. He couldn't unlock the cell door with his unaided mind; he couldn't even alter the probability of a single dust-mote's Brownian path through the somewhat smelly air. Nor could he disappear from his cell and appear, as if by magic, several miles away near the slightly-damaged hulk of his ship, to the wonder and amazement of his Tr'en captors.

He could do, as a matter of fact, precisely nothing. He wished quietly that the Tr'en had seen fit to give him a pack of cards, or a book, or even a folder of tourist pictures. The Wonders of Tr'en, according to all the advance reports, were likely to be pretty boring, but they'd have been better than nothing.

In any decently-run jail, he told himself with indignation, there would at least have been other prisoners to talk to. But on Tr'en Korvin was all alone.

True, every night the guards came in and gave him a concentrated lesson in the local language, but Korvin failed to get much pleasure out of that, being unconscious at the time. But now he was equipped to discuss almost anything from philosophy to plumbing, but there was nobody to discuss it with. He changed position on the bunk and stared at the walls. The Tr'en were efficient; there weren't even any imperfections in the smooth surface to distract him.

He wasn't tired and he wasn't hungry; his captors had left him with a full stock of food concentrates.

But he was almightily bored, and about ready to tell anything to anyone, just for the chance at a little conversation.

As he reached this dismal conclusion, the cell door opened. Korvin got up off the bunk in a hurry and spun around to face his visitor.

The Tr'en was tall, and slightly green.

He looked, as all the Tr'en did, vaguely humanoid--that is, if you don't bother to examine him closely. Life in the universe appeared to be rigidly limited to humanoid types on oxygen planets; Korvin didn't know why, and neither did anybody else. There were a lot of theories, but none that accounted for all the facts satisfactorily. Korvin really didn't care about it; it was none of his business.

The Tr'en regarded him narrowly through catlike pupils. "You are Korvin," he said.

"I am Didyak of the Tr'en," he said. Amenities over with, he relaxed slightly--but no more than slightly--and came into the cell, closing the door behind him. Korvin thought of jumping the Tr'en, but decided quickly against it. He was a captive, and it was unwise to assume that his captors had no more resources than the ones he saw: a small translucent pistollike affair in a holster at the Tr'en's side, and a small knife in a sheath at the belt. Those Korvin could deal with; but there might be almost anything else hidden and ready to fire on him.

"What do you want with me?" Korvin said. The Tr'en speech--apparently there was only one language on the planet--was stiff and slightly awkward, but easily enough learned under drug hypnosis; it was the most rigorously logical construction of its kind Korvin had ever come across. It reminded him of some of the mathematical metalanguages he'd dealt with back on Earth, in training; but it was more closely and carefully constructed than even those marvels.

"I want nothing with you," Didyak said, leaning against the door-frame. "You have other questions?"

Korvin sighed. "What are you doing here, then?" he asked. As conversation, it wasn't very choice; but it was,
he admitted, better than solitude.

"I am leaning against the door," Didyak said. The Tr'en literalist approach to the smallest problems of everyday living was a little hard to get the hang of, Korvin told himself bitterly. He thought for a second.

"Why did you come to me?" he said at last.

Didyak beamed at him. The sight was remarkably unpleasant, involving as it did the disclosure of the Tr'en fifty-eight teeth, mostly pointed. Korvin stared back impassively. "I have been ordered to come to you," Didyak said, "by the Ruler. The Ruler wishes to talk with you."

It wasn't quite "talk"; that was a general word in the Tr'en language, and Didyak had used a specific meaning, roughly: "gain information from, by peaceful and vocal means." Korvin filed it away for future reference. "Why did the Ruler not come to me?"

"The Ruler is the Ruler," Didyak said, slightly discomfited. "You are to go to him. Such is his command."

Korvin shrugged, sighed and smoothed back his hair. "I obey the command of the Ruler," he said--another ritual. Everybody obeyed the command of the Ruler. If you didn't, you never had a second chance to try.

But Korvin meant exactly what he'd said. He was going to obey the commands of the Ruler of the Tr'en--and remove the Tr'en threat from the rest of the galaxy forever.

That, after all, was his job.

* * * * *

The Room of the Ruler was large, square and excessively brown. The walls were dark-brown, the furnishings--a single great chair, several kneeling-benches and a small table near the chair--were light-brown, of some metallic substance, and even the drapes were tan. It was, Korvin decided, much too much of a bad idea, even when the color contrast of the Tr'en themselves were figured in.

The Ruler himself, a Tr'en over seven feet tall and correspondingly broad, sat in the great chair, his four fingers tapping gently on the table near him, staring at Korvin and his guards. The guards stood on either side of their captive, looking as impassive as jade statues, six and a half feet high.

Korvin wasn't attempting to escape. He wasn't pleading with the Ruler. He wasn't defying the Ruler, either. He was just answering questions.

The Tr'en liked to have everything clear. They were a logical race. The Ruler had started with Korvin's race, his name, his sex--if any--and whether or not his appearance were normal for humanity.

Korvin was answering the last question. "Some men are larger than I am," he said, "and some are smaller."

"Within what limits?"

Korvin shrugged. "Some are over eight feet tall," he said, "and others under four feet." He used the Tr'en measurement scale, of course; it didn't seem necessary, though, to mention that both extremes of height were at the circus-freak level. "Then there is a group of humans," he went on, "who are never more than a foot and a half in height, and usually less than that--approximately nine or ten inches. We call these children," he volunteered helpfully.

"Approximately?" the Ruler growled. "We ask for precision here," he said. "We are scientific men. We are exact."

Korvin nodded hurriedly. "Our race is more ... more approximate," he said apologetically.

"Slipshod," the Ruler muttered.

"Undoubtedly," Korvin agreed politely. "I'll try to do the best I can for you."

"You will answer my questions," the Ruler said, "with exactitude." He paused, frowning slightly. "You landed your ship on this planet," he went on. "Who are you?"

"I landed your ship on this planet," he went on. "Why?"

"My job required it," Korvin said.

"A clumsy lie," the Ruler said. "The ship crashed; our examinations prove that beyond any doubt."

"True," Korvin said.

"And it is your job to crash your ship?" the Ruler said. "Wasteful."

Korvin shrugged again. "What I say is true," he announced. "Do you have tests for such matters?"

"We do," the Ruler told him. "We are an exact and a scientific race. A machine for the testing of truth has been adjusted to your physiology. It will be attached to you."

Korvin looked around and saw it coming through the door, pushed by two technicians. It was large and squat and metallic, and it had wheels, dials, blinking lights, tubes and wires, and a seat with armrests and straps. It was obviously a form of lie-detector--and Korvin felt himself marveling again at this race. Earth science had nothing to match their enormous command of the physical universe; adapting a hypnopædic language-course to an alien being so quickly had been wonder enough, but adapting the perilously delicate mechanisms that necessarily made up any lie-detector machinery was almost a miracle. The Tr'en, under other circumstances, would have been a valuable addition to the Comity of Nations.
Being what they were, though, they could only be a menace. And Korvin's appreciation of the size of that menace was growing hourly.

He hoped the lie-detector had been adjusted correctly. If it showed him telling an untruth, he wasn't likely to live long, and his job—not to mention the strongest personal inclinations—demanded most strongly that he stay alive.

He swallowed hard. But when the technicians forced him down into the seat, buckled straps around him, attached wires and electrodes and elastic bands to him at appropriate places and tightened some final screws, he made no resistance.

"We shall test the machine," the Ruler said. "In what room are you?"

"In the Room of the Ruler," Korvin said equably.

"Are you standing or sitting?"

"I am sitting," Korvin said.

"Are you a chulad?" the Ruler asked. A chulad was a small native pet, Korvin knew, something like a greatly magnified deathwatch beetle.

"I am not," he said.

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The Ruler looked to his technicians for a signal, and nodded on receiving it. "You will tell an untruth now," he said. "Are you standing or sitting?"

"I am standing," Korvin said.

The technicians gave another signal. The Ruler looked, in his frowning manner, reasonably satisfied. "The machine," he announced, "has been adjusted satisfactorily to your physiology. The questioning will now continue."

Korvin swallowed again. The test hadn't really seemed extensive enough to him. But, after all, the Tr'en knew their business, better than anyone else could know it. They had the technique and the logic and the training. He hoped they were right.

The Ruler was frowning at him. Korvin did his best to look receptive. "Why did you land your ship on this planet?" the Ruler said.

"My job required it," Korvin said.

The Ruler nodded. "Your job is to crash your ship," he said. "It is wasteful but the machines tell me it is true. Very well, then; we shall find out more about your job. Was the crash intentional?"

Korvin looked sober. "Yes," he said.

The Ruler blinked. "Very well," he said. "Was your job ended when the ship crashed?" The Tr'en word, of course, wasn't ended, nor did it mean exactly that. As nearly as Korvin could make out, it meant "disposed of for all time."

"No," he said.

"What else does your job entail?" the Ruler said.

Korvin decided to throw his first spoke into the wheel. "Staying alive."

The Ruler roared. "Do not waste time with the obvious!" he shouted. "Do not try to trick us; we are a logical and scientific race! Answer correctly."

"I have told the truth," Korvin said.

"But it is not--not the truth we want," the Ruler said.

Korvin shrugged. "I replied to your question," he said. "I did not know that there was more than one kind of truth. Surely the truth is the truth, just as the Ruler is the Ruler?"

"I--" The Ruler stopped himself in mid-roar. "You try to confuse the Ruler," he said at last, in an approximation of his usual one. "But the Ruler will not be confused. We have experts in matters of logic"--the Tr'en word seemed to mean right-saying--"who will advise the Ruler. They will be called."

Korvin's guards were standing around doing nothing of importance now that their captor was strapped down in the lie-detector. The Ruler gestured and they went out the door in a hurry.

The Ruler looked down at Korvin. "You will find that you cannot trick us," he said. "You will find that such fiddling"--chulad-like Korvin translated--"attempts will get you nowhere."

Korvin devoutly hoped so.

* * * * *

The experts in logic arrived shortly, and in no uncertain terms Korvin was given to understand that logical paradox was not going to confuse anybody on the planet. The barber who did, or didn't, shave himself, the secretary of the club whose members were secretaries, Achilles and the tortoise, and all the other lovely paradox-models scattered around were so much primer material for the Tr'en. "They can be treated mathematically," one of the experts, a small emerald-green being, told Korvin thinly. "Of course, you would not understand the mathematics. But that is not important. You need only understand that we cannot be confused by such means."
"Good," Korvin said.

The experts blinked. "Good?" he said.

"Naturally," Korvin said in a friendly tone.

The expert frowned horribly, showing all of his teeth. Korvin did his best not to react. "Your plan is a failure," the expert said, "and you call this a good thing. You can mean only that your plan is different from the one we are occupied with."

"True," Korvin said.

There was a short silence. The expert beamed. He examined the indicators of the lie-detector with great care.

"What is your plan?" he said at last, in a conspiratorial whisper.

"To answer your questions, truthfully and logically," Korvin said.

The silence this time was even longer.

"The machine says that you tell the truth," the expert said at last, in an awed tone. "Thus, you must be a traitor to your native planet. You must want us to conquer your planet, and have come here secretly to aid us."

Korvin was very glad that wasn't a question. It was, after all, the only logical deduction.

But it happened to be wrong.

* * * * *

"The name of your planet is Earth?" the Ruler asked. A few minutes had passed; the experts were clustered around the single chair. Korvin was still strapped to the machine; a logical race makes use of a traitor, but a logical race does not trust him.

"Sometimes," Korvin said.

"It has other names?" the Ruler said.

"It has no name," Korvin said truthfully. The Tr'en idiom was like the Earthly one; and certainly a planet had no name. People attached names to it, that was all. It had none of its own.

"Yet you call it Earth?" the Ruler said.

"I do," Korvin said, "for convenience."

"Do you know its location?" the Ruler said.

"Not with exactitude," Korvin said.

There was a stir. "But you can find it again," the Ruler said.

"I can," Korvin said.

"And you will tell us about it?" the Ruler went on.

"I will," Korvin said, "so far as I am able."

"We will wish to know about weapons," the Ruler said, "and about plans and fortifications. But we must first know of the manner of decision on this planet. Is your planet joined with others in a government or does it exist alone?"

Korvin nearly smiled. "Both," he said.

A short silence was broken by one of the attendant experts. "We have theorized that an underling may be permitted to make some of his own decisions, leaving only the more extensive ones for the master. This seems to us inefficient and liable to error, yet it is a possible system. Is it the system you mean?"

Very sharp, Korvin told himself grimly. "It is," he said.

"Then the government which reigns over several planets is supreme," the Ruler said.

"It is," Korvin said.

"Who is it that governs?" the Ruler said.

They key question had, at last, been asked. Korvin felt grateful that the logical Tr'en had determined to begin from the beginning, instead of going off after details of armament first; it saved a lot of time.

"The answer to that question," Korvin said, "cannot be given to you."

"Any question of fact has an answer," the Ruler snapped. "A paradox is not involved here; a government exists, and some being is the governor. Perhaps several beings share this task; perhaps machines do the work. But where there is a government, there is a governor. Is this agreed?"

"Certainly," Korvin said. "It is completely obvious and true."

"The planet from which you come is part of a system of planets which are governed, you have said," the Ruler went on.

"True," Korvin said.

"Then there is a governor for this system," the Ruler said.

"True," Korvin said again.

The ruler sighed gently. "Explain this governor to us," he said.

Korvin shrugged. "The explanation cannot be given to you."
The Ruler turned to a group of his experts and a short muttered conversation took place. At its end the Ruler turned his gaze back to Korvin. "Is the deficiency in you?" he said. "Are you in some way unable to describe this government?"

"It can be described," Korvin said.
"Then you will suffer unpleasant consequences if you describe it to us?" the Ruler went on.
"I will not," Korvin said.

It was the signal for another conference. With some satisfaction, Korvin noticed that the Tr'en were becoming slightly puzzled; they were no longer moving and speaking with calm assurance.

The plan was taking hold.

The Ruler had finished his conference. "You are attempting again to confuse us," he said.

Korvin shook his head earnestly. "I am attempting," he said, "not to confuse you."

"Then I ask for an answer," the Ruler said.

"I request that I be allowed to ask a question," Korvin said. The Ruler hesitated, then nodded. "Ask it," he said. "We shall answer it if we see fit to do so."

Korvin tried to look grateful. "Well, then," he said, "what is your government?"

The Ruler beckoned to a heavy-set green being, who stepped forward from a knot of Tr'en, inclined his head in Korvin's direction, and began. "Our government is the only logical form of government," he said in a high, sweet tenor. "The Ruler orders all, and his subjects obey. In this way uniformity is gained, and this uniformity aids in the speed of possible action and in the weight of action. All Tr'en act instantly in the same manner. The Ruler is adopted by the previous Ruler; in this way we are assured of a common wisdom and a steady judgment."

"You have heard our government defined," the Ruler said. "Now, you will define yours for us."

Korvin shook his head. "If you insist," he said, "I'll try it. But you won't understand it."

The Ruler frowned. "We shall understand," he said. "Begin. Who governs you?"

"None," Korvin said.

"But you are governed?"

Korvin nodded. "Yes."

"Then there is a governor," the Ruler insisted.

"True," Korvin said. "But everyone is the governor."

"Then there is no government," the Ruler said. "There is no single decision."

"No," Korvin said equably, "there are many decisions binding on all."

"Who makes them binding?" the Ruler asked. "Who forces you to accept these decisions? Some of them must be unfavorable to some beings?"

"Many of them are unfavorable," Korvin said. "But we are not forced to accept them."

"Do you act against your own interests?"

Korvin shrugged. "Not knowingly," he said. The Ruler flashed a look at the technicians handling the lie-detector. Korvin turned to see their expression. They needed no words; the lie-detector was telling them, perfectly obviously, that he was speaking the truth. But the truth wasn't making any sense. "I told you you wouldn't understand it," he said.

"It is a defect in your explanation," the Ruler almost snarled.

"My explanation is as exact as it can be," he said.

The Ruler breathed gustily. "Let us try something else," he said. "Everyone is the governor. Do you share a single mind? A racial mind has been theorized, though we have met with no examples--"

"Neither have we," Korvin said. "We are all individuals, like yourselves."

"But with no single ruler to form policy, to make decisions--"

"We have no need of one," Korvin said calmly.

"Ah," the Ruler said suddenly, as if he saw daylight ahead. "And why not?"

"We call our form of government democracy," Korvin said. "It means the rule of the people. There is no need for another ruler."

One of the experts piped up suddenly. "The beings themselves rule each other?" he said. "This is clearly impossible; for, no one being can have the force to compel acceptance of his commands. Without his force, there can be no effective rule."

"That is our form of government," Korvin said.

"You are lying," the expert said.

One of the technicians chimed in: "The machine tells us--"

"Then the machine is faulty," the expert said. "It will be corrected."

Korvin wondered, as the technicians argued, how long they'd take studying the machine, before they realized it
didn't have any defects to correct. He hoped it wasn't going to be too long; he could foresee another stretch of boredom coming. And, besides, he was getting homesick.

It took three days--but boredom never really had a chance to set in. Korvin found himself the object of more attention than he had hoped for; one by one, the experts came to his cell, each with a different method of resolving the obvious contradictions in his statements.

Some of them went away fuming. Others simply went away, puzzled.

On the third day Korvin escaped.

It wasn't very difficult; he hadn't thought it would be. Even the most logical of thinking beings has a subconscious as well as a conscious mind, and one of the ways of dealing with an insoluble problem is to make the problem disappear. There were only two ways of doing that, and killing the problem's main focus was a little more complicated. That couldn't be done by the subconscious mind; the conscious had to intervene somewhere. And it couldn't.

Because that would mean recognizing, fully and consciously, that the problem was insoluble. And the Tr'en weren't capable of that sort of thinking.

Korvin thanked his lucky stars that their genius had been restricted to the physical and mathematical. Any insight at all into the mental sciences would have given them the key to his existence, and his entire plan, within seconds.

But, then, it was lack of that insight that had called for this particular plan. That, and the political structure of the Tr'en.

The same lack of insight let the Tr'en subconscious work on his escape without any annoying distractions in the way of deep reflection. Someone left a door unlocked and a weapon nearby--all quite intent, Korvin was sure. Getting to the ship was a little more complicated, but presented no new problems; he was airborne, and then spaceborne, inside of a few hours after leaving the cell.

He set his course, relaxed, and cleared his mind. He had no psionic talents, but the men at Earth Central did; he couldn't receive messages, but he could send them. He sent one now.

Mission accomplished; the Tr'en aren't about to come marauding out into space too soon. They've been given food for thought--nice indigestible food that's going to stick in their craws until they finally manage to digest it. But they can't digest it and stay what they are; you've got to be democratic, to some extent, to understand the idea. What keeps us obeying laws we ourselves make? What keeps us obeying laws that make things inconvenient for us? Sheer self-interest, of course--but try to make a Tr'en see it!

With one government and one language, they just weren't equipped for translation. They were too efficient physically to try for the mental sciences at all. No mental sciences, no insight into my mind or their own--and that means no translation.

But--damn it--I wish I were home already.

I'm bored absolutely stiff!

THE END

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Contents

McILVAINE'S STAR
By August Derleth

Old Thaddeus McIlvaine discovered a dark star and took it for his own. Thus he inherited a dark destiny--or did he?

"Call them what you like," said Tex Harrigan. "Lost people or strayed, crackpots or warped geniuses--I know enough of them to fill an entire department of queer people. I've been a reporter long enough to have run into quite a few of them."

"For example?" I said, recognizing Harrigan's mellowness.

"Take Thaddeus McIlvaine," said Harrigan.

"I never heard of him."

"I suppose not," said Harrigan. "But I knew him. He was an eccentric old fellow who had a modest income--enough to keep up his hobbies, which were three: he played cards and chess at a tavern called Bixby's on North Clark Street; he was an amateur astronomer; and he had the fixed idea that there was life somewhere outside this
planet and that it was possible to communicate with other beings—but unlike most others, he tried it constantly with the queer machinery he had rigged up.

"Well, now, this old fellow had a trio of cronies with whom he played on occasion down at Bixby's. He had no one else to confide in. He kept them up with his progress among the stars and his communication with other life in the cosmos beyond our own, and they made a great joke out of it, from all I could gather. I suppose, because he had no one else to talk to, McIlvaine took it without complaint. Well, as I said, I never heard of him until one morning the city editor—it was old Bill Henderson then—called me in and said, 'Harrigan, we just got a lead on a fellow named Thaddeus McIlvaine who claims to have discovered a new star. Amateur astronomer up North Clark. Find him and get a story.' So I set out to track him down...."

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It was a great moment for Thaddeus McIlvaine. He sat down among his friends almost portentously, adjusted his spectacles, and peered over them in his usual manner, half way between a querulous oldster and a reproachful schoolmaster.

"I've done it," he said quietly.
"Aye, and what?" asked Alexander testily.
"I discovered a new star."
"Oh," said Leopold flatly. "A cinder in your eye."
"It lies just off Arcturus," McIlvaine went on, "and it would appear to be coming closer."
"Give it my love," said Richardson with a wry smile. "Have you named it yet? Or don't the discoverers of new stars name them any more? McIlvaine's Star—that's a good name for it. Hard a port of Arcturus, with special displays on windy nights."

McIlvaine only smiled. "It's a dark star," he said presently. "It doesn't have light." He spoke almost apologetically, as if somehow he had disappointed his friends. "I'm going to try and communicate with it."

"That's the ticket," said Alexander.
"Cut for deal," said Leopold.

That was how the news about McIlvaine's Star was received by his cronies. Afterward, after McIlvaine had dutifully played several games of euchre, Richardson conceived the idea of telephoning the Globe to announce McIlvaine's discovery.

* * * * *

"The old fellow took himself seriously," Harrigan went on. "And yet he was so damned mousy about it. I mean, you got the impression that he had been trying for so long that now he hardly believed in his star himself any longer. But there it was. He had a long, detailed story of its discovery, which was an accident, as those things usually are. They happen all the time, and his story sounded convincing enough. Just the same, you don't feel that he really had anything. I took down notes, of course; that was routine. I got a picture of the old man, with never an idea we'd be using it.

"To tell the truth, I carried my notes around with me for a day or so before it occurred to me that it wouldn't do any harm to put a call in to Yerkes Observatory up in Wisconsin. So I did, and they confirmed McIlvaine's Star. The Globe had the story, did it up in fine style.

"It was two weeks before we heard from McIlvaine again...."

* * * * *

That night McIlvaine was more than usually diffident. He was not like a man bearing a message of considerable importance to himself. He slipped into Bixby's, got a glass of beer, and approached the table where his friends sat, almost with trepidation.

"It's a nice evening for May," he said quietly.

Richardson grunted.

Leopold said, "By the way, Mac, whatever became of that star of yours? The one the papers wrote up."

"I think," said McIlvaine cautiously, "I'm quite sure—I have got in touch with them. Only," his brow wrinkled and furrowed, "I can't understand their language."

"Ah," said Richardson with an edge to his voice, "the thing for you to do is to tell them that's your star, and they'll have to speak English from now on, so you can understand them. Why, next thing we know, you'll be getting yourself a rocket or a space-ship and going over to that star to set yourself up as king or something."

"King Thaddeus the First," said Alexander loftily. "All you star-dwellers may kiss the royal foot."

"That would be unsanitary, I think," said McIlvaine, frowning.

Poor McIlvaine! They made him the butt of their jests for over an hour before he took himself off to his quarters, where he sat himself down before his telescope and found his star once more, almost huge enough to blot out Arcturus, but not quite, since it was moving away from that amber star now.
McIlvaine's star was certainly much closer to the Earth than it had been.

He tried once again to contact it with his home-made radio, and once again he received a succession of strange, rhythmic noises which he could not doubt were speech of some kind or other—a rasping, grating speech, to be sure, utterly unlike the speech of McIlvaine's own kind. It rose and fell, became impatient, urgent, despairing—McIlvaine sensed all this and strove mightily to understand.

He sat there for perhaps two hours when he received the distant impression that someone was talking to him in his own language. But there was no longer any sound on the radio. He could not understand what had taken place, but in a few moments he received the clear conviction that the inhabitants of his star had managed to discover the basic elements of his language by the simple process of reading his mind, and were now prepared to talk with him.

What manner of creatures inhabited Earth? they wished to know.

McIlvaine told them. He visualized one of his own kind and tried to put him into words. It was difficult, since he could not rid himself of the conviction that his interlocutors might be utterly alien.

They had no conception of man and doubted man's existence on any other star. There were plant-people on Venus, ant-people on Andromeda, six-legged and four-armed beings which were equal parts mineral and vegetable on Betelguese—but nothing resembling man. "You are evidently alone of your kind in the cosmos," said his interstellar correspondent.

"And what about you?" cried McIlvaine with unaccustomed heat.

Silence was his only answer, but presently he conceived a mental image which was remarkable for its vividness. But the image was of nothing he had ever seen before—of thousands upon thousands of miniature beings, utterly alien to man; they resembled amphibious insects, with thin, elongated heads, large eyes, and antennae set upon a scaled, four-legged body, with rudimentary beetle-like wings. Curiously, they seemed ageless; he could detect no difference among them—all appeared to be the same age.

"We are not, but we rejuvenate regularly," said the creature with whom he corresponded in this strange manner.

Did they have names? McIlvaine wondered.

"I am Guru," said the star's inhabitant. "You are McIlvaine."

And the civilization of their star?

Instantly he saw in his mind's eye vast cities, which rose from beneath a surface which appeared to bear no vegetation recognizable to any human eye, in a terrain which seemed to be desert, of monolithic buildings, which were windowless and had openings only of sufficient size to permit the free passage of its dwarfed dwellers. Within the buildings was evidence of a great and old civilization....

* * * * *

"You see, McIlvaine really believed all this. What an imagination the man had! Of course, the boys at Bixby's gave him a bad time; I don't know how he stood it, but he did. And he always came back. Richardson called the story in; he took a special delight in deviling McIlvaine, and I was sent out to see the old fellow again.

"You couldn't doubt his sincerity. And yet he didn't sound touched."

"But, of course, that part about the insect-like dwellers of the star comes straight out of Wells, doesn't it?" I put in.

"Wells and scores of others," agreed Harrigan. "Wells was probably the first writer to suggest insectivorous inhabitants on Mars; his were considerably larger, though."

"Go on."

"Well, I talked with McIlvaine for quite a while. He told me all about their civilization and about his friend, Guru. You might have thought he was talking about a neighbor of his I had only to step outside to meet.

"Later on, I dropped around at Bixby's and had a talk with the boys there. Richardson let me in on a secret. He had decided to rig up a connection to McIlvaine's machine and do a little talking to the old fellow, making him believe Guru was coming through in English. He meant to give McIlvaine a harder time than ever, and once he had him believing everything he planned to say, they would wait for him at Bixby's and let him make a fool of himself.

"It didn't work out quite that way, however...."

* * * * *

"McIlvaine, can you hear me?"

McIlvaine started with astonishment. His mental impression of Guru became confused; the voice speaking English came clear as a bell, as if from no distance at all.

"Yes," he said hesitantly.

"Well, then, listen to me, listen to Guru. We have now had enough information from you to suit our ends. Within twenty-four hours, we, the inhabitants of Ahli, will begin a war of extermination against Earth...."

"But, why?" cried McIlvaine, astounded.

The image before his mind's eye cleared. The cold, precise features of Guru betrayed anger.
"There is interference," the thought-image informed him. "Leave the machine for a few moments, while we use the disintegrators."

Before he left the machine, McIlvaine had the impression of a greater machine being attached to the means of communication which the inhabitants of his star were using to communicate with him.

"McIlvaine's story was that a few moments later there was a blinding flash just outside his window," continued Harrigan. "There was also a run of instantaneous fire from the window to his machine. When he had collected his wits sufficiently, he ran outside to look. There was nothing there but a kind of grayish dust in a little mound—as if, as he put it, 'somebody had cleaned out a vacuum bag'. He went back in and examined the space from the window to the machine; there were two thin lines of dust there, hardly perceptible, just as if something had been attached to the machine and led outside.

"Now the obvious supposition is naturally that it was Richardson out there, and that the lines of dust from the window to the machine represented the wires he had attached to his microphone while McIlvaine was at Bixby's entertaining his other two cronies, but this is fact, not fiction, and the point of the episode is that Richardson disappeared from that night on."

"You investigated, of course?" I asked.

Harrigan nodded. "Quite a lot of us investigated. The police might have done better. There was a gang war on in Chicago just at that time, and Richardson was nobody with any connections. His nearest relatives weren't anxious about anything but what they might inherit; to tell the truth, his cronies at Bixby's were the only people who worried about him. McIlvaine as much as the rest of them.

"Oh, they gave the old man a hard time, all right. They went through his house with a fine-toothed comb. They dug up his yard, his cellar, and generally put him through it, figuring he was a natural to hang a murder rap on. But there was just nothing to be found, and they couldn't manufacture evidence when there was nothing to show that McIlvaine ever knew that Richardson planned to have a little fun with him.

"And no one had seen Richardson there. There was nothing but McIlvaine's word that he had heard what he said he heard. He needn't have volunteered that, but he did. After the police had finished with him, they wrote him off as a harmless nut. But the question of what happened to Richardson wasn't solved from that day to this."

"People have been known to walk out of their lives," I said. "And never come back."

"Oh, sometimes they do. Richardson didn't. Besides, if he walked out of his life here, he did so without more than the clothing he had on. So much was missing from his effects, nothing more."

"And McIlvaine?"

Harrigan smiled thinly. "He carried on. You couldn't expect him to do anything less. After all, he had worked most of his life trying to communicate with the worlds outside, and he had no intention of resigning his contact, no matter how much Richardson's disappearance upset him. For a while he believed that Guru had actually disintegrated Richardson; he offered that explanation, but by that time the dust had vanished, and he was laughed out of face. So he went back to the machine and Guru and the little excursions to Bixby's...."

"What's the latest word from that star of yours?" asked Leopold, when McIlvaine came in.

"They want to rejuvenate me," said McIlvaine, with a certain shy pleasure.

"What's that?" asked Alexander sourly.

"They say they can make me young again. Like them up there. They never die. They just live so long, and then they rejuvenate, they begin all over. It's some kind of a process they have."

"And I suppose they're planning to come down and fetch you up there and give you the works, is that it?" asked Alexander.

"Well, no," answered McIlvaine. "Guru says there's no need for that—it can be done through the machine; they can work it like the disintegrators; it puts you back to thirty or twenty or wherever you like."

"Well, I'd like to be twenty-five myself again," admitted Leopold.

"I'll tell you what, Mac," said Alexander. "You go ahead and try it; then come back and let us know how it works. If it does, we'll all sit in."

"Better make your will first, though, just in case."

"Oh, I did. This afternoon."

Leopold choked back a snicker. "Don't take this thing too seriously, Mac. After all, we're short one of us now. We'd hate to lose you, too."

McIlvaine was touched. "Oh, I wouldn't change," he hastened to assure his friends. "I'd just be younger, that's all. They'll just work on me through the machine, and over-night I'll be rejuvenated."

"That's certainly a little trick that's got it all over monkey glands," conceded Alexander, grinning.
"Those little bugs on that star of yours have made scientific progress, I'd say," said Leopold.
"They're not bugs," said McIlvaine with faint indignation. "They're people, maybe not just like you and me, but they're people just the same."

He went home that night filled with anticipation. He had done just what he had promised himself he would do, arranging everything for his rejuvenation. Guru had been astonished to learn that people on Earth simply died when there was no necessity of doing so; he had made the offer to rejuvenate McIlvaine himself.

McIlvaine sat down to his machine and turned the complex knobs until he was en rapport with his dark star. He waited for a long time, it seemed, before he knew his contact had been closed. Guru came through.
"Are you ready, McIlvaine?" he asked soundlessly.
"Yes. All ready," said McIlvaine, trembling with eagerness.
"Don't be alarmed now. It will take several hours," said Guru.
"I'm not alarmed," answered McIlvaine.

And indeed he was not; he was filled with an exhilaration akin to mysticism, and he sat waiting for what he was certain must be the experience above all others in his prosaic existence.

"McIlvaine's disappearance coming so close on Richardson's gave us a beautiful story," said Harrigan. "The only trouble was, it wasn't new when the Globe got around to it. We had lost our informant in Richardson; it never occurred to Alexander or Leopold to telephone us or anyone about McIlvaine's unaccountable absence from Bixby's. Finally, Leopold went over to McIlvaine's house to find out whether the old fellow was sick.

"A young fellow opened up.
"'Where's McIlvaine?' Leopold asked.
"'I'm McIlvaine,' the young fellow answered.
"'Thaddeus McIlvaine,' Leopold explained.
"'That's my name,' was the only answer he got.
"'I mean the Thaddeus McIlvaine who used to play cards with us over at Bixby's,' said Leopold.
"'He shook his head. 'Sorry, you must be looking for someone else.'
"'What're you doing here?' Leopold asked then.
"'Why, I inherited what my uncle left,' said the young fellow.

"And, sure enough, when Leopold talked to me and persuaded me to go around with him to McIlvaine's lawyer, we found that the old fellow had made a will and left everything to his nephew, a namesake. The stipulations were clear enough; among them was the express wish that if anything happened to him, the elder Thaddeus McIlvaine, of no matter what nature, but particularly something allowing a reasonable doubt of his death, the nephew was still to be permitted to take immediate possession of the property and effects."

"Of course, you called on the nephew," I said.

Harrigan nodded. "Sure. That was the indicated course, in any event. It was routine for both the press and the police. There was nothing suspicious about his story; it was straightforward enough, except for one or two little details. He never did give us any precise address; he just mentioned Detroit once. I called up a friend on one of the papers there and put him up to looking up Thaddeus McIlvaine; the only young man of that name he could find appeared to be the same man as the present inhabitant's uncle, though the description fit pretty well."

"There was a resemblance, then?"

"Oh, sure. One could have imagined that old Thaddeus McIlvaine had looked somewhat like his nephew when he himself was a young man. But don't let the old man's rigmarole about rejuvenation make too deep an impression on you. The first thing the young fellow did was to get rid of that machine of his uncle's. Can you imagine his uncle having done something like that?"

I shook my head, but I could not help thinking what an ironic thing it would have been if there had been something to McIlvaine's story, and in the process to which he had been subjected from out of space he had not been rejuvenated so much as just sent back in time, in which case he would have no memory of the machine nor of the use to which it had been put. It would have been as ironic for the inhabitants of McIlvaine's star, too; they would doubtless have looked forward to keeping this contact with Earth open and failed to realize that McIlvaine's construction differed appreciably from theirs.

"He virtually junked it. Said he had no idea what it could be used for, and didn't know how to operate it."
"And the telescope?"
"Oh, he kept that. He said he had some interest in astronomy and meant to develop that if time permitted."
"So much ran in the family, then."
"Yes. More than that. Old McIlvaine had a trick of seeming shy and self-conscious. So did this nephew of his.
Wherever he came from, his origins must have been backward. I suspect that he was ashamed of them, and if I had
to guess, I'd put him in the Kentucky hill-country or the Ozarks. Modern concepts seemed to be pretty well too
much for him, and his thinking would have been considerably more natural at the turn of the century.

"I had to see him several times. The police chivvied him a little, but not much; he was so obviously innocent of
everything that there was nothing for them in him. And the search for the old man didn't last long; no one had seen
him after that last night at Bixby's, and, since everyone had already long since concluded that he was mentally a
little off center, it was easy to conclude that he had wandered away somewhere, probably an amnesiac. That he
might have anticipated that is indicated in the hasty preparation of his will, which came out of the blue, said
Barnevall, who drew it up for him.

"I felt sorry for him."
"For whom?"

"The nephew. He seemed so lost, you know--like a man who wanted to remember something, but couldn't. I
noticed that several times when I tried to talk to him; I had the feeling each time that there was something he wanted
desperately to say, it hovered always on the rim of his awareness, but somehow there was no bridge to it, no clue to
put it into words. He tried so hard for something he couldn't put his finger on."

"What became of him?"

"Oh, he's still around. I think he found a job somewhere. As a matter of fact, I saw him just the other evening.
He had apparently just come from work and he was standing in front of Bixby's with his face pressed to the window
looking in. I came up nearby and watched him. Leopold and Alexander were sitting inside--a couple of lonely old
men looking out. And a lonely young man looking in. There was something in McIlvaine's face--that same thing I
had noticed so often before, a kind of expression that seemed to say there was something he ought to know,
something he ought to remember, to do, to say, but there was no way in which he could reach back to it."

"Or forward," I said with a wry smile.

"As you like," said Harrigan. "Pour me another, will you?"

I did and he took it.

"That poor devil!" he muttered. "He'd be happier if he could only go back where he came from."

"Wouldn't we all?" I asked. "But nobody ever goes home again. Perhaps McIlvaine never had a home like that."

"You'd have thought so if you could have seen his face looking in at Leopold and Alexander. Oh, it may have
been a trick of the streetlight there, it may have been my imagination. But it sticks to my memory, and I keep
thinking how alike the two were--old McIlvaine trying so desperately to find someone who could believe him, and
his nephew now trying just as hard to find someone to accept him or a place he could accept on the only terms he
knows."

THE END

Contents

MISSING LINK
by Frank Herbert

The Romantics used to say that the eyes were the windows of the Soul. A good Alien Xenologist might not put
it quite so poetically ... but he can, if he's sharp, read a lot in the look of an eye!

"We ought to scrape this planet clean of every living thing on it," muttered Umbo Stetson, section chief of
Investigation & Adjustment.

Stetson paced the landing control bridge of his scout cruiser. His footsteps grated on a floor that was the rear
wall of the bridge during flight. But now the ship rested on its tail fins--all four hundred glistening red and black
meters of it. The open ports of the bridge looked out on the jungle roof of Gienah III some one hundred fifty meters
below. A butter yellow sun hung above the horizon, perhaps an hour from setting.

"Clean as an egg!" he barked. He paused in his round of the bridge, glared out the starboard port, spat into the
fire-blackened circle that the cruiser's jets had burned from the jungle.

The I-A section chief was dark-haired, gangling, with large head and big features. He stood in his customary
slouch, a stance not improved by sacklike patched blue fatigues. Although on this present operation he rated the flag
of a division admiral, his fatigues carried no insignia. There was a general unkempt, straggling look about him.

Lewis Orne, junior I-A field man with a maiden diploma, stood at the opposite port, studying the jungle
horizon. Now and then he glanced at the bridge control console, the chronometer above it, the big translite map of
their position tilted from the opposite bulkhead. A heavy planet native, he felt vaguely uneasy on this Gienah III with its gravity of only seven-eighths Terran Standard. The surgical scars on his neck where the micro-communications equipment had been inserted itched maddeningly. He scratched.

"Hah!" said Stetson. "Politicians!"

A thin black insect with shell-like wings flew in Orne's port, settled in his close-cropped red hair. Orne pulled the insect gently from his hair, released it. Again it tried to land in his hair. He ducked. It flew across the bridge, out the port beside Stetson.

There was a thick-muscled, no-fat look to Orne, but something about his blocky, off-center features suggested a clown.

"I'm getting tired of waiting," he said.

"You're tired! Hah!"

A breeze rippled the tops of the green ocean below them. Here and there, red and purple flowers jutted from the verdure, bending and nodding like an attentive audience.

"Just look at that blasted jungle!" barked Stetson. "Them and their stupid orders!"

"A call bell tinkled on the bridge control console. The red light above the speaker grid began blinking. Stetson shot an angry glance at it. "Yeah, Hal?"

"O.K., Stet. Orders just came through. We use Plan C. ComGO says to brief the field man, and jet out of here."

"Did you ask them about using another field man?"

Orne looked up attentively.

The speaker said: "Yes. They said we have to use Orne because of the records on the Delphinus."

"Well then, will they give us more time to brief him?"

"Negative. It's crash priority. ComGO expects to blast the planet anyway."

Stetson glared at the grid. "Those fat-headed, lard-bottomed, pig-brained ... POLITICIANS!" He took two deep breaths, subsided. "O.K. Tell them we'll comply."

"One more thing, Stet."

"What now?"

"I've got a confirmed contact."

Instantly, Stetson was poised on the balls of his feet, alert. "Where?"

"About ten kilometers out. Section AAB-6."

"How many?"

"A mob. You want I should count them?"

"No. What're they doing?"

"Making a beeline for us. You better get a move on."

"O.K. Keep us posted."

"Right."

* * * * *

Stetson looked across at his junior field man. "Orne, if you decide you want out of this assignment, you just say the word. I'll back you to the hilt."

"Why should I want out of my first field assignment?"

"Listen, and find out." Stetson crossed to a tilt-locker behind the big translite map, hauled out a white coverall uniform with gold insignia, tossed it to Orne. "Get into these while I brief you on the map."

"But this is an R&R uni--" began Orne.

"Get that uniform on your ugly frame!"

"Yes, sir, Admiral Stetson, sir. Right away, sir. But I thought I was through with old Rediscovery & Reeducation when you drafted me off of Hamal into the I-A ... sir."

Almost as an afterthought, he said: "... Sir."

A wolfish grin cracked Stetson's big features. "I'm soooooo happy you have the proper attitude of subservience toward authority."

Orne zipped up the coverall uniform. "Oh, yes, sir ... sir."

"O.K., Orne, pay attention." Stetson gestured at the map with its green superimposed grid squares. "Here we are. Here's that city we flew over on our way down. You'll head for it as soon as we drop you. The place is big enough that if you hold a course roughly northeast you can't miss it. We're--"

Again the call bell rang.

"What is it this time, Hal?" barked Stetson.

"They've changed to Plan H, Stet. New orders cut."

"Five days?"
"That's all they can give us. ComGO says he can't keep the information out of High Commissioner Bullone's hands any longer than that."

"It's five days for sure then."

"Is this the usual R&R foul-up?" asked Orne.

Stetson nodded. "Thanks to Bullone and company! We're just one jump ahead of catastrophe, but they still pump the bushwah into the Rah & Rah boys back at dear old Uni-Galacta!"

"You're making light of my revered alma mater," said Orne. He struck a pose. "We must reunite the lost planets with our centers of culture and industry, and take up the glor-ious onward march of mankind that was so bru-tally--"

"Can it!" snapped Stetson. "We both know we're going to rediscover one planet too many some day. Rim War all over again. But this is a different breed of fish. It's not, repeat, not a re-discovery."

Orne sobered. "Alien?"

"Yes. A-L-I-E-N! A never-before-contacted culture. That language you were force fed on the way over, that's an alien language. It's not complete ... all we have off the minis. And we excluded data on the natives because we've been hoping to dump this project and nobody the wiser."

"Holy mazoo!"

"Twenty-six days ago an I-A search ship came through here, had a routine mini-sneaker look at the place. When he combed in his net of sneakers to check the tapes and films, lo and behold, he had a little stranger."

"One of theirs?"

"No. It was a mini off the Delphinus Rediscovery. The Delphinus has been unreported for eighteen standard months!"

"Did it crack up here?"

"We don't know. If it did, we haven't been able to spot it. She was supposed to be way off in the Balandine System by now. But we've something else on our minds. It's the one item that makes me want to blot out this place, and run home with my tail between my legs. We've a--"

Again the call bell chimed.

"NOW WHAT?" roared Stetson into the speaker.

"I've got a mini over that mob, Stet. They're talking about us. It's a definite raiding party."

"What armament?"

"Too gloomy in that jungle to be sure. The infra beam's out on this mini. Looks like hard pellet rifles of some kind. Might even be off the Delphinus."

"Can't you get closer?"

"Wouldn't do any good. No light down there, and they're moving up fast."

"Keep an eye on them, but don't ignore the other sectors," said Stetson.

"You think I was born yesterday?" barked the voice from the grid. The contact broke off with an angry sound.

* * * * *

"One thing I like about the I-A," said Stetson. "It collects such even-tempered types." He looked at the white uniform on Orne, wiped a hand across his mouth as though he'd tasted something dirty.

"Why am I wearing this thing?" asked Orne.

"Disguise."

"But there's no mustache!"

Stetson smiled without humor. "That's one of I-A's answers to those fat-keistered politicians. We're setting up our own search system to find the planets before they do. We've managed to put spies in key places at R&R. Any touchy planets our spies report, we divert the files."

"Then what?"

"Then we look into them with bright boys like you--disguised as R&R field men."

"Goody, goody. And what happens if R&R stumbles onto me while I'm down there playing patty cake?"

"We disown you."

"But you said an I-A ship found this joint."

"It did. And then one of our spies in R&R intercepted a routine request for an agent-instructor to be assigned here with full equipment. Request signed by a First-Contact officer name of Diston ... of the Delphinus!"

"But the Del--"

"Yeah. Missing. The request was a forgery. Now you see why I'm mostly for rubbing out this place. Who'd dare forge such a thing unless he knew for sure that the original FC officer was missing ... or dead?"

"What the jumped up mazoo are we doing here, Stet?" asked Orne. "Alien calls for a full contact team with all of the--"

"It calls for one planet-buster bomb ... buster--in five days. Unless you give them a white bill in the meantime.
High Commissioner Bullone will have word of this planet by then. If Gienah III still exists in five days, can't you imagine the fun the politicians'll have with it? Mama mia! We want this planet cleared for contact or dead before then.

"I don't like this, Stet."
"YOU don't like it!"
"Look," said Orne. "There must be another way. Why ... when we teamed up with the Alerinoids we gained five hundred years in the physical sciences alone, not to mention the--"
"The Alerinoids didn't knock over one of our survey ships first."
"What if the Delphinus just crashed here ... and the locals picked up the pieces?"
"That's what you're going in to find out, Orne. But answer me this: If they do have the Delphinus, how long before a tool-using race could be a threat to the galaxy?"
"I saw that city they built, Stet. They could be dug in within six months, and there'd be no--"
"Yeah."
Orne shook his head. "But think of it: Two civilizations that matured along different lines! Think of all the different ways we'd approach the same problems ... the lever that'd give us for--"
"You sound like a Uni-Galacta lecture! Are you through marching arm in arm into the misty future?"
Orne took a deep breath. "Why's a freshman like me being tossed into this dish?"
"You'd still be on the Delphinus master lists as an R&R field man. That's important if you're masquerading."
"Am I the only one? I know I'm a recent convert, but--"
"You want out?"
"I didn't say that. I just want to know why I'm--"
"Because the bigdomes fed a set of requirements into one of their iron monsters. Your card popped out. They were looking for somebody capable, dependable ... and ... expendable!"
"Hey!"
"That's why I'm down here briefing you instead of sitting back on a flagship. I got you into the I-A. Now, you listen carefully: If you push the panic button on this one without cause, I will personally flay you alive. We both know the advantages of an alien contact. But if you get into a hot spot, and call for help, I'll dive this cruiser into that city to get you out!"
Orne swallowed. "Thanks, Stet. I'm--"

* * * * *

"We're going to take up a tight orbit. Out beyond us will be five transports full of I-A marines and a Class IX Monitor with one planet-buster. You're calling the shots, God help you! First, we want to know if they have the Delphinus ... and if so, where it is. Next, we want to know just how warlike these goons are. Can we control them if they're bloodthirsty. What's their potential?"
"In five days?"
"Not a second more."
"What do we know about them?"
"Not much. They look something like an ancient Terran chimpanzee ... only with blue fur. Face is hairless, pink-skinned." Stetson snapped a switch. The translite map became a screen with a figure frozen on it. "Like that. This is life size."
"Looks like the missing link they're always hunting for," said Orne. "Yeah, but you've got a different kind of a missing link."
"Vertical-slit pupils in their eyes," said Orne. He studied the figure. It had been caught from the front by a minisneaker camera. About five feet tall. The stance was slightly bent forward, long arms. Two vertical nose slits. A flat, lipless mouth. Receding chin. Four-fingered hands. It wore a wide belt from which dangled neat pouches and what looked like tools, although their use was obscure. There appeared to be the tip of a tail protruding from behind one of the squat legs. Behind the creature towered the faery spires of the city they'd observed from the air.
"Tails?" asked Orne.
"Yeah. They're arboreal. Not a road on the whole planet that we can find. But there are lots of vine lanes through the jungles." Stetson's face hardened. "Match that with a city as advanced as that one."
"Slave culture?"
"Probably."
"How many cities have they?"
"We've found two. This one and another on the other side of the planet. But the other one's a ruin."
"A ruin? Why?"
"You tell us. Lots of mysteries here."
"What's the planet like?"
"Mostly jungle. There are polar oceans, lakes and rivers. One low mountain chain follows the equatorial belt about two thirds around the planet."
"But only two cities. Are you sure?"
"Reasonably so. It'd be pretty hard to miss something the size of that thing we flew over. It must be fifty kilometers long and at least ten wide. Swarming with these creatures, too. We've got a zone-count estimate that places the city's population at over thirty million."
"Whee-ew! Those are tall buildings, too."
"We don't know much about this place, Orne. And unless you bring them into the fold, there'll be nothing but ashes for our archaeologists to pick over."
"Seems a dirty shame."
"I agree, but--"
The call bell jangled.
* * * * *
Stetson's voice sounded tired: "Yeah, Hal?"
"That mob's only about five kilometers out, Stet. We've got Orne's gear outside in the disguised air sled."
"We'll be right down."
"Why a disguised sled?" asked Orne.
"If they think it's a ground buggy, they might get careless when you most need an advantage. We could always scoop you out of the air, you know."
"What're my chances on this one, Stet?"
Stetson shrugged. "I'm afraid they're slim. These goons probably have the Delphinus, and they want you just long enough to get your equipment and everything you know."
"Rough as that, eh?"
"According to our best guess. If you're not out in five days, we blast."
Orne cleared his throat.
"Want out?" asked Stetson.
"No."
"Use the back-door rule, son. Always leave yourself a way out. Now ... let's check that equipment the surgeons put in your neck."
"You read me?"
"Sure. I can--"
"No!" hissed the voice. "Touch the mike contact. Keep your mouth closed. Just use your speaking muscles without speaking."
Orne obeyed.
"O.K.," said Stetson. "You come in loud and clear."
"I ought to. I'm right on top of you!"
"There'll be a relay ship over you all the time," said Stetson. "Now ... when you're not touching that mike contact this rig'll still feed us what you say ... and everything that goes on around you, too. We'll monitor everything. Got that?"
"Yes."
Stetson held out his right hand. "Good luck. I meant that about diving in for you. Just say the word."
"I know the word, too," said Orne. "HELP!"
* * * * *
Gray mud floor and gloomy aisles between monstrous bluish tree trunks—that was the jungle. Only the barest weak glimmering of sunlight penetrated to the mud. The disguised sled—its para-grav units turned off—lurched and skidded around buttress roots. Its headlights swung in wild arcs across the trunks and down to the mud. Aerial creepers—great looping vines of them—swung down from the towering forest ceiling. A steady drip of condensation spattered the windshield, forcing Orne to use the wipers.

In the bucket seat of the sled’s cab, Orne fought the controls. He was plagued by the vague slow-motion-floating sensation that a heavy planet native always feels in lighter gravity. It gave him an unhappy stomach.

Things skipped through the air around the lurching vehicle: flitting and darting things. Insects came in twin cones, siphoned toward the headlights. There was an endless chittering whistling tok-tok-toking in the gloom beyond the lights.

Stetson's voice hissed suddenly through the surgically implanted speaker: "How's it look?"
"Alien."
"Any sign of that mob?"
"Negative."
"O.K. We're taking off."

Behind Orne, there came a deep rumbling roar that receded as the scout cruiser climbed its jets. All other sounds hung suspended in after-silence, then resumed: the strongest first and then the weakest.

A heavy object suddenly arced through the headlights, swinging on a vine. It disappeared behind a tree. Another. Another. Ghostly shadows with vine pendulums on both sides. Something banged down heavily onto the hood of the sled.

Orne braked to a creaking stop that shifted the load behind him, found himself staring through the windshield at a native of Gienah III. The native crouched on the hood, a Mark XX exploding-pellet rifle in his right hand directed at Orne's head. In the abrupt shock of meeting, Orne recognized the weapon: standard issue to the marine guards on all R&R survey ships.

The native appeared the twin of the one Orne had seen on the translite screen. The four-fingered hand looked extremely capable around the stock of the Mark XX.

Slowly, Orne put a hand to his throat, pressed the contact button. He moved his speaking muscles: "Just made contact with the mob. One on the hood now has one of our Mark XX rifles aimed at my head."
"Negative. Stand by. He looks cautious rather than hostile."

Orne held up his right hand, palm out. He had a second thought: held up his left hand, too. Universal symbol of peaceful intentions: empty hands. The gun muzzle lowered slightly. Orne called into his mind the language that had been hypnoforced into him. Ocheero? No. That means 'The People.' Ah ... And he had the heavy fricative greeting sound.

"Ffroiragrazzi," he said.
The native shifted to the left, answered in pure, unaccented High Galactese: "Who are you?"

Orne fought down a sudden panic. The lipless mouth had looked so odd forming the familiar words.

"The equipment every R&R field man uses to help the people of a rediscovered planet improve themselves."

Orne nodded at the rifle. "Would you mind pointing that weapon some other direction? It makes me nervous."

The gun muzzle remained unwaveringly on Orne's middle. The native's mouth opened, revealing long canines.

"Do we not look strange to you?"

"I take it there's been a heavy mutational variation in the humanoid norm on this planet," said Orne. "What is it? Hard radiation?"

"The equipment every R&R field man uses to help the people of a rediscovered planet improve themselves."

"The gun muzzle remained unwaveringly on Orne's middle. The native's mouth opened, revealing long canines.

"Do we not look strange to you?"

"I take it there's been a heavy mutational variation in the humanoid norm on this planet," said Orne. "What is it? Hard radiation?"

No answer.

"I am Lewis Orne of Rediscovery and Reeducation. I was sent here at the request of the First-Contact officer on the Delphinus Rediscovery."

"Where is your ship?" demanded the Gienahn.

"It put me down and left."

"Why?"

"It was behind schedule for another appointment."

Out of the corners of his eyes, Orne saw more shadows dropping to the mud around him. The sled shifted as someone climbed onto the load behind the cab. The someone scuttled agilely for a moment.

The native climbed down to the cab's side step, opened the door. The rifle was held at the ready. Again, the lipless mouth formed Galactese words: "What do you carry in this ... vehicle?"

"The equipment every R&R field man uses to help the people of a rediscovered planet improve themselves."

Orne nodded at the rifle. "Would you mind pointing that weapon some other direction? It makes me nervous."

The native stepped off the side of the sled and walked to Orne. "Where do you go?"

"I was hoping to go to your city. Is it permitted?"

A long pause while the vertical-slit pupils of Tanub's eyes expanded and contracted. "It is permitted."

Stetson's voice came through the hidden speaker: "All bets off. We're coming in after you. That Mark XX is the final straw. It means they have the Delphinus for sure!"

Orne touched his throat. "No! Give me a little more time!"

"Why?"

"I have a hunch about these creatures."
"What is it?"
"No time now. Trust me."

Another long pause in which Orne and Tanub continued to study each other. Presently, Stetson said: "O.K. Go ahead as planned. But find out where the Delphinus is! If we get that back we pull their teeth."
"Why do you keep touching your throat?" demanded Tanub.
"I'm nervous," said Orne. "Guns always make me nervous."
The muzzle lowered slightly.
"Shall we continue on to your city?" asked Orne. He wet his lips with his tongue. The cab light on Tanub's face was giving the Gienahn an eerie sinister look.
"We can go soon," said Tanub.
"Will you join me inside here?" asked Orne. "There's a passenger seat right behind me."
Tanub's eyes moved catlike: right, left. "Yes." He turned, barked an order into the jungle gloom, then climbed in behind Orne.
"When do we go?" asked Orne.
"The great sun will be down soon," said Tanub. "We can continue as soon as Chiranachuruso rises."
"Chiranachuruso?"
"Our satellite ... our moon," said Tanub.
"It's a beautiful word," said Orne. "Chiranachuruso."
"In our tongue it means: The Limb of Victory," said Tanub. "By its light we will continue."
Orne turned, looked back at Tanub. "Do you mean to tell me that you can see by what light gets down here through those trees?"
"Can you not see?" asked Tanub.
"Not without the headlights."
"Our eyes differ," said Tanub. He bent toward Orne, peered. The vertical slit pupils of his eyes expanded, contracted. "You are the same as the ... others."
"Oh, on the Delphinus?"
Pause. "Yes."

Presently, a greater gloom came over the jungle, bringing a sudden stillness to the wild life. There was a chittering commotion from the natives in the trees around the sled. Tanub shifted behind Orne.
"We may go now," he said. "Slowly ... to stay behind my ... scouts."
"Right." Orne eased the sled forward around an obstructing root.

* * * * *

Silence while they crawled ahead. Around them shapes flung themselves from vine to vine.
"I admired your city from the air," said Orne. "It is very beautiful."
"Yes," said Tanub. "Why did you land so far from it?"
"We didn't want to come down where we might destroy anything."
"There is nothing to destroy in the jungle," said Tanub.
"Why do you have such a big city?" asked Orne.
Silence.
"I said: Why do you--"
"You are ignorant of our ways," said Tanub. "Therefore, I forgive you. The city is for our race. We must breed and be born in sunlight. Once--long ago--we used crude platforms on the tops of the trees. Now ... only the ... wild ones do this."

Stetson's voice hissed in Orne's ears: "Easy on the sex line, boy. That's always touchy. These creatures are oviparous. Sex glands are apparently hidden in that long fur behind where their chins ought to be."
"Who controls the breeding sites controls our world," said Tanub. "Once there was another city. We destroyed it."
"Are there many ... wild ones?" asked Orne.
"Fewer each year," said Tanub.
"There's how they get their slaves," hissed Stetson.
"You speak excellent Galactese," said Orne.
"The High Path Chief commanded the best teacher," said Tanub. "Do you, too, know many things, Orne?"
"That's why I was sent here," said Orne.
"Are there many planets to teach?" asked Tanub.
"Very many," said Orne. "Your city--I saw very tall buildings. Of what do you build them?"
"In your tongue--glass," said Tanub. "The engineers of the Delphinus said it was impossible. As you saw--they
are wrong."

"A glass-blowing culture," hissed Stetson. "That'd explain a lot of things."

Slowly, the disguised sled crept through the jungle. Once, a scout swooped down into the headlights, waved.

Orne stopped on Tanub's order, and they waited almost ten minutes before proceeding.

"Wild ones?" asked Orne.

"Perhaps," said Tanub. A glowing of many lights grew visible through the giant tree trunks. It grew brighter as the sled crept through the last of the jungle, emerged in cleared land at the edge of the city.

Orne stared upward in awe. The city fluted and spiraled into the moonlit sky. It was a fragile appearing lacery of bridges, winking dots of light. The bridges wove back and forth from building to building until the entire visible network appeared one gigantic dew-glittering web.

"All that with glass," murmured Orne. "What's happening?" hissed Stetson.

Orne touched his throat contact. "We're just into the city clearing, proceeding toward the nearest building."

"This is far enough," said Tanub. * * * * *

Orne stopped the sled. In the moonlight, he could see armed Gienahns all around. The buttressed pedestal of one of the buildings loomed directly ahead. It looked taller than had the scout cruiser in its jungle landing circle.

Tanub leaned close to Orne's shoulder. "We have not deceived you, have we, Orne?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You have recognized that we are not mutated members of your race."

Orne swallowed. Into his ears came Stetson's voice: "Better admit it."

"That's true," said Orne.

"I like you, Orne," said Tanub. "You shall be one of my slaves. You will teach me many things."

"How did you capture the Delphinus?" asked Orne.

"You know that, too?"

"You have one of their rifles," said Orne.

"Your race is no match for us, Orne ... in cunning, in strength, in the prowess of the mind. Your ship landed to repair its tubes. Very inferior ceramics in those tubes."

Orne turned, looked at Tanub in the dim glow of the cab light. "Have you heard about the I-A, Tanub?"

"I-A? What is that?" There was a wary tenseness in the Gienahn's figure. His mouth opened to reveal the long canines.

"You took the Delphinus by treachery?" asked Orne.

"They were simple fools," said Tanub. "We are smaller, thus they thought us weaker." The Mark XX's muzzle came around to center on Orne's stomach. "You have not answered my question. What is the I-A?"

"I am of the I-A," said Orne. "Where've you hidden the Delphinus?"

"In the place that suits us best," said Tanub. "In all our history there has never been a better place."

"What do you plan to do with it?" asked Orne.

"Within a year we will have a copy with our own improvements. After that—"

"You intend to start a war?" asked Orne.

"In the jungle the strong slay the weak until only the strong remain," said Tanub.

"And then the strong prey upon each other?" asked Orne.

"That is a quibble for women," said Tanub.

"It's too bad you feel that way," said Orne. "When two cultures meet like this they tend to help each other. What have you done with the crew of the Delphinus?"

"They are slaves," said Tanub. "Those who still live. Some resisted. Others objected to teaching us what we want to know." He waved the gun muzzle. "You will not be that foolish, will you, Orne?"

"No need to be," said Orne. "I've another little lesson to teach you: I already know where you've hidden the Delphinus."

"Go, boy!" hissed Stetson. "Where is it?"

"Impossible!" barked Tanub.

"It's on your moon," said Orne. "Darkside. It's on a mountain on the darkside of your moon."

Tanub's eyes dilated, contracted. "You read minds?"

"The I-A has no need to read minds," said Orne. "We rely on superior mental prowess."

"The marines are on their way," hissed Stetson. "We're coming in to get you. I'm going to want to know how you guessed that one."
"You are a weak fool like the others," gritted Tanub.
"It's too bad you formed your opinion of us by observing only the low grades of the R&R," said Orne.
"Easy, boy," hissed Stetson. "Don't pick a fight with him now. Remember, his race is arboreal. He's probably as strong as an ape."
"I could kill you where you sit!" grated Tanub.
"You write finish for your entire planet if you do," said Orne. "I'm not alone. There are others listening to every word we say. There's a ship overhead that could split open your planet with one bomb--wash it with molten rock. It'd run like the glass you use for your buildings."
"You are lying!"
"We'll make you an offer," said Orne. "We don't really want to exterminate you. We'll give you limited membership in the Galactic Federation until you prove you're no menace to us."
"You dare insult me!" growled Tanub.
"You had better believe me," said Orne. "We--"
Stetson's voice interrupted him: "Got it, Orne! They caught the Delphinus on the ground right where you said it'd be! Blew the tubes off it. Marines now mopping up."
"It's like this," said Orne. "We already have recaptured the Delphinus." Tanub's eyes went instinctively skyward. "Except for the captured armament you still hold, you obviously don't have the weapons to meet us," continued Orne. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be carrying that rifle off the Delphinus."
"If you speak the truth, then we shall die bravely," said Tanub.
"No need for you to die," said Orne.
"Better to die than be slaves," said Tanub.
"We don't need slaves," said Orne. "We--"
"I cannot take the chance that you are lying," said Tanub. "I must kill you now."

* * * * *

Orne's foot rested on the air sled control pedal. He depressed it. Instantly, the sled shot skyward, heavy G's pressing them down into the seats. The gun in Tanub's hands was slammed into his lap. He struggled to raise it. To Orne, the weight was still only about twice that of his home planet of Chargon. He reached over, took the rifle, found safety belts, bound Tanub with them. Then he eased off the acceleration.
"We don't need slaves," said Orne. "We have machines to do our work. We'll send experts in here, teach you people how to exploit your planet, how to build good transportation facilities, show you how to mine your minerals, how to--"
"And what do we do in return?" whispered Tanub.
"You could start by teaching us how you make superior glass," said Orne. "I certainly hope you see things our way. We really don't want to have to come down there and clean you out. It'd be a shame to have to blast that city into little pieces."
Tanub wilted. Presently, he said: "Send me back. I will discuss this with ... our council." He stared at Orne. "You I-A's are too strong. We did not know."

* * * * *

In the wardroom of Stetson's scout cruiser, the lights were low, the leather chairs comfortable, the green beige table set with a decanter of Hochar brandy and two glasses.

Orne lifted his glass, sipped the liquor, smacked his lips. "For a while there, I thought I'd never be tasting anything like this again."
Stetson took his own glass. "ComGO heard the whole thing over the general monitor net," he said. "D'you know you've been breveted to senior field man?"
"Ah, they've already recognized my sterling worth," said Orne.
The wolfish grin took over Stetson's big features. "Senior field men last about half as long as the juniors," he said. "Mortality's terrific?"
"I might've known," said Orne. He took another sip of the brandy.
Stetson flicked on the switch of a recorder beside him. "O.K. You can go ahead any time."
"Where do you want me to start?"
"First, how'd you spot right away where they'd hidden the Delphinus?"
"Easy. Tanub's word for his people was Grazzi. Most races call themselves something meaning The People. But in his tongue that's Ocheero. Grazzi wasn't on the translated list. I started working on it. The most likely answer was that it had been adopted from another language, and meant enemy."
"And that told you where the Delphinus was?"
"No. But it fitted my hunch about these Gienahns. I'd kind of felt from the first minute of meeting them that they had a culture like the Indians of ancient Terra."

"Why?"

"They came in like a primitive raiding party. The leader dropped right onto the hood of my sled. An act of bravery, no less. Counting coup, you see?"

"I guess so."

"Then he said he was High Path Chief. That wasn't on the language list, either. But it was easy: Raider Chief. There's a word in almost every language in history that means raider and derives from a word for road, path or highway."

"Highwaymen," said Stetson.


"Yeah, yeah. But where'd all this translation griff put--"

"Don't be impatient. Glass-blowing culture meant they were just out of the primitive stage. That, we could control. Next, he said their moon was Chiranachuruso, translated as The Limb of Victory. After that it just fell into place."

"How?"

"The vertical-slit pupils of their eyes. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Maybe. What's it mean to you?"

"Night-hunting predator accustomed to dropping upon its victims from above. No other type of creature ever has had the vertical slit. And Tanub said himself that the Delphinus was hidden in the best place in all of their history. History? That'd be a high place. Dark, likewise. Ergo: a high place on the darkside of their moon."

"I'm a pie-eyed greepus," whispered Stetson.

Orne grinned, said: "You probably are ... sir."

THE END
"I know that They don't have anything like it," the CIA man agreed.  
"And you also know, I suppose, that it was built to simulate actual war situations. We fight wars in this computer ... wars with missiles and bombs and gas. Real wars, complete down to the tiniest detail. The computer tells us what will actually happen to every missile, every city, every man ... who dies, how many planes are lost, how many trucks will fail to start on a cold morning, whether a battle is won or lost ..."

General LeRoy interrupted. "The computer runs these analyses for both sides, so we can see what's happening to Them, too."

The CIA man gestured impatiently. "War games simulations aren't new. You've been doing them for years."

"Yes, but this machine is different," Ford pointed out. "It not only gives a much more detailed war game. It's the next logical step in the development of machine-simulated war games." He hesitated dramatically.

"Well, what is it?"

"We've added a variation of the electro-encephalograph ..."

The CIA man stopped walking. "The electro-what?"

"Electro-encephalograph. You know, a recording device that reads the electrical patterns of your brain. Like the electro-cardiograph."

"Oh."

"But you see, we've given the EEG a reverse twist. Instead of using a machine that makes a recording of the brain's electrical wave output, we've developed a device that will take the computer's readout tapes, and turn them into electrical patterns that are put into your brain!"

"I don't get it."

General LeRoy took over. "You sit at the machine's control console. A helmet is placed over your head. You set the machine in operation. You see the results."

"Yes," Ford went on. "Instead of reading rows of figures from the computer's printer ... you actually see the war being fought. Complete visual and auditory hallucinations. You can watch the progress of the battles, and as you change strategy and tactics you can see the results before your eyes."

"The idea, originally, was to make it easier for the General Staff to visualize strategic situations," General LeRoy said.

"But every one who's used the machine has either resigned his commission or gone insane," Ford added.  
The CIA man cocked an eye at LeRoy. "You've used the computer."

"Correct."

"And you have neither resigned nor cracked up."

General LeRoy nodded. "I called you in."

Before the CIA man could comment, Ford said, "The computer's right inside this doorway. Let's get this over with while the building is still empty."

They stepped in. The physicist and the general showed the CIA man through the room-filling rows of massive consoles.  
"It's all transistorized and subminiaturized, of course," Ford explained. "That's the only way we could build so much detail into the machine and still have it small enough to fit inside a single building."

"A single building?"

"Oh yes; this is only the control section. Most of this building is taken up by the circuits, the memory banks, and the rest of it."

"Hm-m-m."

They showed him finally to a small desk, studded with control buttons and dials. The single spotlight above the desk lit it brilliantly, in harsh contrast to the semidarkness of the rest of the room.  
"Since you've never run the computer before," Ford said, "General LeRoy will do the controlling. You just sit and watch what happens."

The general sat in one of the well-padded chairs and donned a grotesque headgear that was connected to the desk by a half-dozen wires. The CIA man took his chair slowly.  
When they put one of the bulky helmets on him, he looked up at them, squinting a little in the bright light.  
"This ... this isn't going to ... well, do me any damage, is it?"

"My goodness, no," Ford said. "You mean mentally? No, of course not. You're not on the General Staff, so it shouldn't ... it won't ... affect you the way it did the others. Their reaction had nothing to do with the computer per se ..."

"Several civilians have used the computer with no ill effects," General LeRoy said. "Ford has used it many times."
The CIA man nodded, and they closed the transparent visor over his face. He sat there and watched General LeRoy press a series of buttons, then turn a dial.

"Can you hear me?" The general's voice came muffled through the helmet.

"Yes," he said.

"All right. Here we go. You're familiar with Situation One-Two-One? That's what we're going to be seeing."

Situation One-Two-One was a standard war game. The CIA man was well acquainted with it. He watched the general flip a switch, then sit back and fold his arms over his chest. A row of lights on the desk console began blinking on and off, one, two, three ... down to the end of the row, then back to the beginning again, on and off, on and off ...

And then, somehow, he could see it!

He was poised incredibly somewhere in space, and he could see it all in a funny, blurry-double-sighted, dreamlike way. He seemed to be seeing several pictures and hearing many voices, all at once. It was all mixed up, and yet it made a weird kind of sense.

For a panicked instant he wanted to rip the helmet off his head. It's only an illusion, he told himself, forcing calm on his unwilling nerves. Only an illusion.

But it seemed strangely real.

He was watching the Gulf of Mexico. He could see Florida off to his right, and the arching coast of the southeastern United States. He could even make out the Rio Grande River.

Situation One-Two-One started, he remembered, with the discovery of missile-bearing Enemy submarines in the Gulf. Even as he watched the whole area—as though perched on a satellite—he could see, underwater and close-up, the menacing shadowy figure of a submarine gliding through the crystal blue sea.

He saw, too, a patrol plane as it spotted the submarine and sent an urgent radio warning.

The underwater picture dissolved in a bewildering burst of bubbles. A missile had been launched. Within seconds, another burst—this time a nuclear depth charge—utterly destroyed the submarine.

It was confusing. He was everyplace at once. The details were overpowering, but the total picture was agonizingly clear.

Six submarines fired missiles from the Gulf of Mexico. Four were immediately sunk, but too late. New Orleans, St. Louis and three Air Force bases were obliterated by hydrogen-fusion warheads.

The CIA man was familiar with the opening stages of the war. The first missile fired at the United States was the signal for whole fleets of missiles and bombers to launch themselves at the Enemy. It was confusing to see the world at once; at times he could not tell if the fireball and mushroom cloud was over Chicago or Shanghai, New York or Novosibirsk, Baltimore or Budapest.

It did not make much difference, really. They all got it in the first few hours of the war; as did London and Moscow, Washington and Peking, Detroit and Delhi, and many, many more.

The defensive systems on all sides seemed to operate well, except that there were never enough anti-missiles. Defensive systems were expensive compared to attack rockets. It was cheaper to build a deterrent than to defend against it.

The missiles flashed up from submarines and railway cars, from underground silos and stratospheric jets; secret ones fired off automatically when a certain airbase command post ceased beaming out a restraining radio signal. The defensive systems were simply overloaded. And when the bombs ran out, the missiles carried dust and germs and gas. On and on. For six days and six firelit nights. Launch, boost, coast, re-enter, death.

* * * * *

And now it was over, the CIA man thought. The missiles were all gone. The airplanes were exhausted. The nations that had built the weapons no longer existed. By all the rules he knew of, the war should have been ended.

Yet the fighting did not end. The machine knew better. There were still many ways to kill an enemy. Time-tested ways. There were armies fighting in four continents, armies that had marched overland, or splashed ashore from the sea, or dropped out of the skies.

Incredibly, the war went on. When the tanks ran out of gas, and the flame throwers became useless, and even the prosaic artillery pieces had no more rounds to fire, there were still simple guns and even simpler bayonets and swords.

The proud armies, the descendents of the Alexanders and Caesars and Temujins and Wellingtons and Grants and Rommels, relived their evolution in reverse.

The war went on. Slowly, inevitably, the armies split apart into smaller and smaller units, until the tortured countryside that so recently had felt the impact of nuclear war once again knew the tread of bands of armed marauders. The tiny savage groups, stranded in alien lands, far from the homes and families that they knew to be destroyed, carried on a mockery of war, lived off the land, fought their own countrymen if the occasion suited, and
revived the ancient terror of hand-wielded, personal, one-head-at-a-time killing.

The CIA man watched the world disintegrate. Death was an individual business now, and none the better for no longer being mass-produced. In agonized fascination he saw the myriad ways in which a man might die. Murder was only one of them. Radiation, disease, toxic gases that lingered and drifted on the once-innocent winds, and--finally--the most efficient destroyer of them all: starvation.

Three billion people (give or take a meaningless hundred million) lived on the planet Earth when the war began. Now, with the tenuous thread of civilization burned away, most of those who were not killed by the fighting itself succumbed inexorably to starvation.

Not everyone died, of course. Life went on. Some were lucky.

A long darkness settled on the world. Life went on for a few, a pitiful few, a bitter, hateful, suspicious, savage few. Cities became pestholes. Books became fuel. Knowledge died. Civilization was completely gone from the planet Earth.

* * * * *

The helmet was lifted slowly off his head. The CIA man found that he was too weak to raise his arms and help. He was shivering and damp with perspiration.

"Now you see," Ford said quietly, "why the military men cracked up when they used the computer."

General LeRoy, even, was pale. "How can a man with any conscience at all direct a military operation when he knows that that will be the consequence?"

The CIA man struck up a cigarette and pulled hard on it. He exhaled sharply. "Are all the war games ... like that? Every plan?"

"Some are worse," Ford said. "We picked an average one for you. Even some of the 'brushfire' games get out of hand and end up like that."

"So ... what do you intend to do? Why did you call me in? What can I do?"

"You're with CIA," the general said. "Don't you handle espionage?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with it?"

The general looked at him. "It seems to me that the next logical step is to make damned certain that They get the plans to this computer ... and fast!"

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**Contents**

**PANDEMIC**

by Jesse Franklin Bone

Generally, human beings don't do totally useless things consistently and widely. So--maybe there is something to it--

"We call it Thurston's Disease for two perfectly good reasons," Dr. Walter Kramer said. "He discovered it--and he was the first to die of it." The doctor fumbled fruitlessly through the pockets of his lab coat. "Now where the devil did I put those matches?"

"Are these what you're looking for?" the trim blonde in the gray seersucker uniform asked. She picked a small box of wooden safety matches from the littered lab table beside her and handed them to him.

"Ah," Kramer said. "Thanks. Things have a habit of getting lost around here."

"I can believe that," she said as she eyed the frenzied disorder around her. Her boss wasn't much better than his laboratory, she decided as she watched him strike a match against the side of the box and apply the flame to the charred bowl of his pipe. His long dark face became half obscured behind a cloud of bluish smoke as he puffed furiously. He looked like a lean untidy devil recently escaped from hell with his thick brows, green eyes and lank black hair highlighted intermittently by the leaping flame of the match. He certainly didn't look like a pathologist. She wondered if she was going to like working with him, and shook her head imperceptibly. Possibly, but not probably. It might be difficult being cooped up here with him day after day. Well, she could always quit if things got too tough. At least there was that consolation.

He draped his lean body across a lab stool and leaned his elbows on its back. There was a faint smile on his face as he eyed her quizzically. "You're new," he said. "Not just to this lab but to the Institute."

She nodded. "I am, but how did you know?"

"Thurston's Disease. Everyone in the Institute knows that name for the plague, but few outsiders do." He smiled sardonically. "Virus pneumonic plague--that's a better term for public use. After all, what good does it do to
advertise a doctor's stupidity?"
  She eyed him curiously. "De mortuis?" she asked.
  He nodded. "That's about it. We may condemn our own, but we don't like laymen doing it. And besides, Thurston had good intentions. He never dreamed this would happen."
  "The road to hell, so I hear, is paved with good intentions."
  "Undoubtedly," Kramer said dryly. "Incidentally, did you apply for this job or were you assigned?"
  "I applied."
  "Someone should have warned you I dislike clichés," he said. He paused a moment and eyed her curiously.
  "Just why did you apply?" he asked. "Why are you imprisoning yourself in a sealed laboratory which you won't leave as long as you work here. You know, of course, what the conditions are. Unless you resign or are carried out feet first you will remain here ... have you considered what such an imprisonment means?"
  "I considered it," she said, "and it doesn't make any difference. I have no ties outside and I thought I could help. I've had training. I was a nurse before I was married."
  "Divorced?"
  "Widowed."
  Kramer nodded. There were plenty of widows and widowers outside. Too many. But it wasn't much worse than in the Institute where, despite precautions, Thurston's disease took its toll of life.
  "Did they tell you this place is called the suicide section?" he asked.
  She nodded.
  "Weren't you frightened?"
  "Of dying? Hardly. Too many people are doing it nowadays."
  He grimaced, looking more satanic than ever. "You have a point," he admitted, "but it isn't a good one. Young people should be afraid of dying."
  "You're not."
  "I'm not young. I'm thirty-five, and besides, this is my business. I've been looking at death for eleven years. I'm immune."
  "I haven't your experience," she admitted, "but I have your attitude."
  "What's your name?" Kramer said.
  "Barton, Mary Barton."
  "Hm-m-m. Well, Mary--I can't turn you down. I need you. But I could wish you had taken some other job."
  "I'll survive."
  He looked at her with faint admiration in his greenish eyes. "Perhaps you will," he said. "All right. As to your duties--you will be my assistant, which means you'll be a dishwasher, laboratory technician, secretary, junior pathologist, and coffee maker. I'll help you with all the jobs except the last one. I make lousy coffee." Kramer grinned, his teeth a white flash across the darkness of his face. "You'll be on call twenty-four hours a day, underpaid, overworked, and in constant danger until we lick Thurston's virus. You'll be expected to handle the jobs of three people unless I can get more help--and I doubt that I can. People stay away from here in droves. There's no future in it."
  Mary smiled wryly. "Literally or figuratively?" she asked.
  He chuckled. "You have a nice sense of graveyard humor," he said. "It'll help. But don't get careless. Assistants are hard to find."
  She shook her head. "I won't. While I'm not afraid of dying I don't want to do it. And I have no illusions about the danger. I was briefed quite thoroughly."
  "They wanted you to work upstairs?"
  She nodded.
  * * * * *
  "I suppose they need help, too. Thurston's Disease has riddled the medical profession. Just don't forget that this place can be a death trap. One mistake and you've had it. Naturally, we take every precaution, but with a virus no protection is absolute. If you're careless and make errors in procedure, sooner or later one of those submicroscopic protein molecules will get into your system."
  "You're still alive."
  "So I am," Kramer said, "but I don't take chances. My predecessor, my secretary, my lab technician, my junior pathologist, and my dishwasher all died of Thurston's Disease." He eyed her grimly. "Still want the job?" he asked.
  "I lost a husband and a three-year old son," Mary said with equal grimness. "That's why I'm here. I want to destroy the thing that killed my family. I want to do something. I want to be useful."
  He nodded. "I think you can be," he said quietly.
"Mind if I smoke?" she asked. "I need some defense against that pipe of yours."

"No--go ahead. Out here it's all right, but not in the security section."

Mary took a package of cigarettes from her pocket, lit one and blew a cloud of gray smoke to mingle with the blue haze from Kramer's pipe.

"Comfortable?" Kramer asked.

She nodded.

He looked at his wrist watch. "We have half an hour before the roll tube cultures are ready for examination. That should be enough to tell you about the modern Pasteur and his mutant virus. Since your duties will primarily involve Thurston's Disease, you'd better know something about it."

He settled himself more comfortably across the lab bench and went on talking in a dry schoolmasterish voice. "Alan Thurston was an immunologist at Midwestern University Medical School. Like most men in the teaching trade, he also had a research project. If it worked out, he'd be one of the great names in medicine; like Jenner, Pasteur, and Salk. The result was that he pushed it and wasn't too careful. He wanted to be famous."

"He's well known now," Mary said, "at least within the profession."

"Quite," Kramer said dryly. "He was working with gamma radiations on microorganisms, trying to produce a mutated strain of Micrococcus pyogenes that would have enhanced antigenic properties."

"Wait a minute, doctor. It's been four years since I was active in nursing. Translation, please."

Kramer chuckled. "He was trying to make a vaccine out of a common infectious organism. You may know it better as Staphylococcus. As you know, it's a pus former that's made hospital life more dangerous than it should be because it develops resistance to antibiotics. What Thurston wanted to do was to produce a strain that would stimulate resistance in the patient without causing disease--something that would help patients protect themselves rather than rely upon doubtfully effective antibiotics."

"That wasn't a bad idea."

"There was nothing wrong with it. The only trouble was that he wound up with something else entirely. He was like the man who wanted to make a plastic suitable for children's toys and ended up with a new explosive. You see, what Thurston didn't realize was that his cultures were contaminated. He'd secured them from the University Clinic and had, so he thought, isolated them. But somehow he'd brought a virus along--probably one of the orphan group or possibly a phage."

"Orphan?"

"Yes--one that was not a normal inhabitant of human tissues. At any rate there was a virus--and he mutated it rather than the bacteria. Actually, it was simple enough, relatively speaking, since a virus is infinitely simpler in structure than a bacterium, and hence much easier to modify with ionizing radiation. So he didn't produce an antigen--he produced a disease instead. Naturally, he contracted it, and during the period between his infection and death he managed to infect the entire hospital. Before anyone realized what they were dealing with, the disease jumped from the hospital to the college, and from the college to the city, and from the city to--"

"Yes, I know that part of it. It's all over the world now--killing people by the millions."

"Well," Kramer said, "at least it's solved the population explosion." He blew a cloud of blue smoke in Mary's direction. "And it did make Thurston famous. His name won't be quickly forgotten."

She coughed. "I doubt if it ever will be," she said, "but it won't be remembered the way he intended."

He looked at her suspiciously. "That cough--"

"No, it's not Thurston's Disease. It's that pipe. It's rancid."

"It helps me think," Kramer said.

"You could try cigarettes--or candy," she suggested.

"I'd rather smoke a pipe."

"There's cancer of the lip and tongue," she said helpfully.

"Don't quote Ochsner. I don't agree with him. And besides, you smoke cigarettes, which are infinitely worse."

"Only four or five a day. I don't saturate my system with nicotine."

"In another generation," Kramer observed, "you'd have run through the streets of the city brandishing an ax smashing saloons. You're a lineal descendent of Carrie Nation." He puffed quietly until his head was surrounded by a nimbus of smoke. "Stop trying to reform me," he added. "You haven't been here long enough."

"Not even God could do that, according to the reports I've heard," she said. He laughed. "I suppose my reputation gets around."

"It does. You're an opinionated slave driver, a bully, an intellectual tyrant, and the best pathologist in this center."

"The last part of that sentence makes up for unflattering honesty of the first," Kramer said. "At any rate, once
we realized the situation we went to work to correct it. Institutes like this were established everywhere the disease appeared for the sole purpose of examining, treating, and experimenting with the hope of finding a cure. This section exists for the evaluation of treatment. We check the human cases, and the primates in the experimental laboratories. It is our duty to find out if anything the boys upstairs try shows any promise. We were a pretty big section once, but Thurston's virus has whittled us down. Right now there is just you and me. But there's still enough work to keep us busy. The experiments are still going on, and there are still human cases, even though the virus has killed off most of the susceptibles. We've evaluated over a thousand different drugs and treatments in this Institute alone."

"And none of them have worked?"

"No--but that doesn't mean the work's been useless. The research has saved others thousands of man hours chasing false leads. In this business negative results are almost as important as positive ones. We may never discover the solution, but our work will keep others from making the same mistakes."

"I never thought of it that way."

"People seldom do. But if you realize that this is international, that every worker on Thurston's Disease has a niche to fill, the picture will be clearer. We're doing our part inside the plan. Others are, too. And there are thousands of labs involved. Somewhere, someone will find the answer. It probably won't be us, but we'll help get the problem solved as quickly as possible. That's the important thing. It's the biggest challenge the race has ever faced--and the most important. It's a question of survival." Kramer's voice was sober. "We have to solve this. If Thurston's Disease isn't checked, the human race will become extinct. As a result, for the first time in history all mankind is working together."

"All? You mean the Communists are, too?"

"Of course. What's an ideology if there are no people to follow it?" Kramer knocked the ashes out of his pipe, looked at the laboratory clock and shrugged. "Ten minutes more," he said, "and these tubes will be ready. Keep an eye on that clock and let me know. Meantime you can straighten up this lab and find out where things are. I'll be in the office checking the progress reports." He turned abruptly away, leaving her standing in the middle of the cluttered laboratory.

"Now what am I supposed to do here?" Mary wondered aloud. "Clean up, he says. Find out where things are, he says. Get acquainted with the place, he says. I could spend a month doing that." She looked at the littered bench, the wall cabinets with sliding doors half open, the jars of reagents sitting on the sink, the drainboard, on top of the refrigerator and on the floor. The disorder was appalling. "How he ever manages to work in here is beyond me. I suppose that I'd better start somewhere--perhaps I can get these bottles in some sort of order first." She sighed and moved toward the wall cabinets. "Oh well," she mused, "I asked for this."

* * * * *

"Didn't you hear that buzzer?" Kramer asked.

"Was that for me?" Mary said, looking up from a pile of bottles and glassware she was sorting.

"Partly. It means they've sent us another post-mortem from upstairs."

"What is it?"

"I don't know--man or monkey, it makes no difference. Whatever it is, it's Thurston's Disease. Come along. I'd like to." She put down the bottle she was holding and followed him to a green door at the rear of the laboratory.

"Inside," Kramer said, "you will find a small anteroom, a shower, and a dressing room. Strip, shower, and put on a clean set of lab coveralls and slippers which you will find in the dressing room. You'll find surgical masks in the wall cabinet beside the lockers. Go through the door beyond the dressing room and wait for me there. I'll give you ten minutes."

* * * * *

"We do this both ways," Kramer said as he joined her in the narrow hall beyond the dressing room. "We'll reverse the process going out."

"You certainly carry security to a maximum," she said through the mask that covered the lower part of her face.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he said as he opened a door in the hall. "Note the positive air pressure," he said. "Theoretically nothing can get in here except what we bring with us. And we try not to bring anything." He stood aside to show her the glassed-in cubicle overhanging a bare room dominated by a polished steel post-mortem table that glittered in the harsh fluorescent lighting. Above the table a number of jointed rods and clamps hung from the ceiling. A low metal door and series of racks containing instruments and glassware were set into the opposite wall together with the gaping circular orifice of an open autoclave.

"We work by remote control, just like they do at the AEC. See those handlers?" He pointed to the control console set into a small stainless steel table standing beside the sheet of glass at the far end of the cubicle. "They're
connected to those gadgets up there." He indicated the jointed arms hanging over the autopsy table in the room beyond. "I could perform a major operation from here and never touch the patient. Using these I can do anything I could in person with the difference that there's a quarter inch of glass between me and my work. I have controls that let me use magnifiers, and even do microdissection, if necessary."

"Where's the cadaver?" Mary asked.
"Across the room, behind that door," he said, waving at the low, sliding metal partition behind the table. "It's been prepped, decontaminated and ready to go."
"What happens when you're through?"
"Watch." Dr. Kramer pressed a button on the console in front of him. A section of flooring slid aside and the table tipped. "The cadaver slides off that table and through that hole. Down below is a highly efficient crematorium."

Mary shivered. "Neat and effective," she said shakily.
"After that the whole room is sprayed with germicide and sterilized with live steam. The instruments go into the autoclave, and thirty minutes later we're ready for another post-mortem."
"We use the handlers to put specimens into those jars," he said, pointing to a row of capped glass jars of assorted sizes on a wall rack behind the table. "After they're capped, the jars go onto that carrier beside the table. From here they pass through a decontamination chamber and into the remote-control laboratory across the hall where we can run biochemical and histological techniques. Finished slides and mounted specimens then go through another decontamination process to the outside lab. Theoretically, this place is proof against anything."
"It seems to be," Mary said, obviously impressed. "I've never seen anything so elegant."
"Neither did I until Thurston's Disease became a problem." Kramer shrugged and sat down behind the controls. "Watch, now," he said as he pressed a button. "Let's see what's on deck--man or monkey. Want to make a bet? I'll give you two to one it's a monkey."

She shook her head.

* * * * *

The low door slid aside and a steel carriage emerged into the necropsy room bearing the nude body of a man. The corpse gleamed pallidly under the harsh shadowless glare of the fluorescents in the ceiling as Kramer, using the handlers, rolled it onto the post-mortem table and clamped it in place on its back. He pushed another button and the carriage moved back into the wall and the steel door slid shut. "That'll be decontaminated," he said, "and sent back upstairs for another body. I'd have lost," he remarked idly. "Lately the posts have been running three to one in favor of monkeys."

He moved a handler and picked up a heavy scalpel from the instrument rack. "There's a certain advantage to this," he said as he moved the handler delicately. "These gadgets give a tremendous mechanical advantage. I can cut right through small bones and cartilage without using a saw."
"How nice," Mary said. "I expect you enjoy yourself."
"I couldn't ask for better equipment," he replied noncommittally. With deft motion of the handler he drew the scalpel down across the chest and along the costal margins in the classic inverted "Y" incision. "We'll take a look at the thorax first," he said, as he used the handlers to pry open the rib cage and expose the thoracic viscera. "Ah! Thought so! See that?" He pointed with a small handler that carried a probe. "Look at those lungs." He swung a viewer into place so Mary could see better. "Look at those abscesses and necrosis. It's Thurston's Disease, all right, with secondary bacterial invasion."

The grayish solidified masses of tissue looked nothing like the normal pink appearance of healthy lungs. Studded with yellowish spherical abscesses they lay swollen and engorged within the gaping cavity of the chest.
"You know the pathogenesis of Thurston's Disease?" Kramer asked.
Mary shook her head, her face yellowish-white in the glare of the fluorescents.
"It begins with a bronchial cough," Kramer said. "The virus attacks the bronchioles first, destroys them, and passes into the deeper tissues of the lungs. As with most virus diseases there is a transitory leukopenia--a drop in the total number of white blood cells--and a rise in temperature of about two or three degrees. As the virus attacks the alveolar structures, the temperature rises and the white blood cell count becomes elevated. The lungs become inflamed and painful. There is a considerable quantity of lymphoid exudate and pleural effusion. Secondary invaders and pus-forming bacteria follow the viral destruction of the lung tissue and form abscesses. Breathing becomes progressively more difficult as more lung tissue is destroyed. Hepatization and necrosis inactivate more lung tissue as the bacteria get in their dirty work, and finally the patient suffocates."
"But what if the bacteria are controlled by antibiotics?"
"Then the virus does the job. It produces atelectasis followed by progressive necrosis of lung tissue with gradual liquefaction of the parenchyma. It's slower, but just as fatal. This fellow was lucky. He apparently stayed out
of here until he was almost dead. Probably he's had the disease for about a week. If he'd have come in early, we
could have kept him alive for maybe a month. The end, however, would have been the same."

"It's a terrible thing," Mary said faintly.

"You'll get used to it. We get one or two every day." He shrugged. "There's nothing here that's interesting," he
said as he released the clamps and tilted the table. For what seemed to Mary an interminable time, the cadaver clung
to the polished steel. Then abruptly it slid off the shining surface and disappeared through the square hole in the
floor. "We'll clean up now," Kramer said as he placed the instruments in the autoclave, closed the door and locked it,
and pressed three buttons on the console.

From jets embedded in the walls a fine spray filled the room with fog.
"Germicide," Kramer said. "Later there'll be steam. That's all for now. Do you want to go?"

Mary nodded.

"If you feel a little rocky there's a bottle of Scotch in my desk. I'll split a drink with you when we get out of
here."

"Thanks," Mary said. "I think I could use one."

* * * * *

"Barton! Where is the MacNeal stain!" Kramer's voice came from the lab. "I left it on the sink and it's gone!"

"It's with the other blood stains and reagents. Second drawer from the right in the big cabinet. There's a label on
the drawer," Mary called from the office. "If you can wait until I finish filing these papers, I'll come in and help
you."

"I wish you would," Kramer's voice was faintly exasperated. "Ever since you've organized my lab I can't find
anything."

"You just have a disorderly mind," Mary said, as she slipped the last paper into its proper folder and closed the
file. "I'll be with you in a minute."

"I don't dare lose you," Kramer said as Mary came into the lab. "You've made yourself indispensable. It'd take
me six months to undo what you've done in one. Not that I mind," he amended, "but I was used to things the way
they were." He looked around the orderly laboratory with a mixture of pride and annoyance. "Things are so neat
they're almost painful."

"You look more like a pathologist should," Mary said as she deftly removed the tray of blood slides from in
front of him and began to run the stains. "It's my job to keep you free to think."

"Whose brilliant idea is that? Yours?"

"No--the Director's. He told me what my duties were when I came here. And I think he's right. You should be
using your brain rather than fooling around with blood stains and sectioning tissues."

"But I like to do things like that," Kramer protested. "It's relaxing."

"What right have you to relax," Mary said. "Outside, people are dying by the thousands and you want to relax.
Have you looked at the latest mortality reports?"

"No--"

"You should. The WHO estimates that nearly two billion people have died since Thurston's Disease first
appeared in epidemic proportions. That's two out of three. And more are dying every day. Yet you want to relax."

"I know," Kramer said, "but what can we do about it. We're working but we're getting no results."

"You might use that brain of yours," Mary said bitterly. "You're supposed to be a scientist. You have facts.
Can't you put them together?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, "I've been working on this problem longer than you think. I come down here at
night--"

"I know. I clean up after you."

"I haven't gotten anywhere. Sure, we can isolate the virus. It grows nicely on monkey lung cells. But that
doesn't help. The thing has no apparent antigenicity. It parasitizes, but it doesn't trigger any immune reaction. We
can kill it, but the strength of the germicide is too great for living tissue to tolerate."

"Some people seem to be immune."

"Sure they do--but why?"

"Don't ask me. I'm not the scientist."

"Play like one," Kramer growled. "Here are the facts. The disease attacks people of all races and ages. So far
every one who is attacked dies. Adult Europeans and Americans appear to be somewhat more resistant than others
on a population basis. Somewhere around sixty per cent of them are still alive, but it's wiped out better than eighty
per cent of some groups. Children get it worse. Right now I doubt if one per cent of the children born during the past
ten years are still alive."

"It's awful!" Mary said.
"It's worse than that. It's extinction. Without kids the race will die out." Kramer rubbed his forehead.

"Have you any ideas?"

"Children have less resistance," Kramer replied. "An adult gets exposed to a number of diseases to which he builds an immunity. Possibly one of these has a cross immunity against Thurston's virus."

"Then why don't you work on that line?" Mary asked.

"Just what do you think I've been doing? That idea was put out months ago, and everyone has been taking a crack at it. There are twenty-four laboratories working full time on that facet and God knows how many more working part time like we are. I've screened a dozen common diseases, including the six varieties of the common cold virus. All, incidentally, were negative."

"Well--are you going to keep on with it?"

"I have to." Kramer rubbed his eyes. "It won't let me sleep. I'm sure we're on the right track. Something an adult gets gives him resistance or immunity." He shrugged. "Tell you what. You run those bloods out and I'll go take another look at the data." He reached into his lab coat and produced a pipe. "I'll give it another try."

"Sometimes I wish you'd read without puffing on that thing," Mary said.

"Your delicate nose will be the death of me yet--" Kramer said.

"It's my lungs I'm worried about," Mary said. "They'll probably look like two pieces of well-tanned leather if I associate with you for another year."

"Stop complaining. You've gotten me to wear clean lab coats. Be satisfied with a limited victory," Kramer said absently, his eyes staring unseeingly at a row of reagent bottles on the bench. Abruptly he nodded. "Fantastic," he muttered, "but it's worth a check." He left the room, slamming the door behind him in his hurry.

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"That man!" Mary murmured. "He'd drive a saint out of his mind. If I wasn't so fond of him I'd quit. If anyone told me I'd fall in love with a pathologist, I'd have said they were crazy. I wish--" Whatever the wish was, it wasn't uttered. Mary gasped and coughed rackingly. Carefully she moved back from the bench, opened a drawer and found a thermometer. She put it in her mouth. Then she drew a drop of blood from her forefinger and filled a red and white cell pipette, and made a smear of the remainder.

She was interrupted by another spasm of coughing, but she waited until the paroxysm passed and went methodically back to her self-appointed task. She had done this many times before. It was routine procedure to check on anything that might be Thurston's Disease. A cold, a sore throat, a slight difficulty in breathing--all demanded the diagnostic check. It was as much a habit as breathing. This was probably the result of that cold she'd gotten last week, but there was nothing like being sure. Now let's see--temperature 99.5 degrees, red cell count 4-1/2 million. White cell count ... oh! 2500 ... leukopenia! The differential showed a virtual absence of polymorphs, lymphocytes and monocytes. The whole slide didn't have two hundred. Eosinophils and basophils way up--twenty and fifteen per cent respectively--a relative rise rather than an absolute one--leukopenia, no doubt about it.

She shrugged. There wasn't much question. She had Thurston's Disease. It was the beginning stages, the harsh cough, the slight temperature, the leukopenia. Pretty soon her white cell count would begin to rise, but it would rise too late. In fact, it was already too late. It's funny, she thought. I'm going to die, but it doesn't frighten me. In fact, the only thing that bothers me is that poor Walter is going to have a terrible time finding things. But I can't put this place the way it was. I couldn't hope to.

She shook her head, slid gingerly off the lab stool and went to the hall door. She'd better check in at the clinic, she thought. There was bed space in the hospital now. Plenty of it. That hadn't been true a few months ago but the only ones who were dying now were the newborn and an occasional adult like herself. The epidemic had died out not because of lack of virulence but because of lack of victims. The city outside, one of the first affected, now had less than forty per cent of its people left alive. It was a hollow shell of its former self. People walked its streets and went through the motions of life. But they were not really alive. The vital criteria were as necessary for a race as for an individual. Growth, reproduction, irritability, metabolism--Mary smiled wryly. Whoever had authored that hackneyed mnemonic that life was a "grim" proposition never knew how right he was, particularly when one of the criteria was missing.

The race couldn't reproduce. That was the true horror of Thurston's Disease--not how it killed, but who it killed. No children played in the parks and playgrounds. The schools were empty. No babies were pushed in carriages or taken on tours through the supermarkets in shopping carts. No advertisements of motherhood, or children, or children's things were in the newspapers or magazines. They were forbidden subjects--too dangerously emotional to touch. Laughter and shrill young voices had vanished from the earth to be replaced by the drab grayness of silence and waiting. Death had laid cold hands upon the hearts of mankind and the survivors were frozen to numbness.

* * * * *

It was odd, she thought, how wrong the prophets were. When Thurston's Disease broke into the news there
were frightened predictions of the end of civilization. But they had not materialized. There were no mass insurrections, no rioting, no organized violence. Individual excesses, yes—but nothing of a group nature. What little panic there was at the beginning disappeared once people realized that there was no place to go. And a grim passivity had settled upon the survivors. Civilization did not break down. It endured. The mechanics remained intact. People had to do something even if it was only routine counterfeit of normal life—the stiff upper lip in the face of disaster.

It would have been far more odd, Mary decided, if mankind had given way to panic. Humanity had survived other plagues nearly as terrible as this—and racial memory is long. The same grim patience of the past was here in the present. Man would somehow survive, and civilization go on.

It was inconceivable that mankind would become extinct. The whole vast resources and pooled intelligence of surviving humanity were focused upon Thurston’s Disease. And the disease would yield. Humanity waited with childlike confidence for the miracle that would save it. And the miracle would happen, Mary knew it with a calm certainty as she stood in the cross corridor at the end of the hall, looking down the thirty yards of tile that separated her from the elevator that would carry her up to the clinic and oblivion. It might be too late for her, but not for the race. Nature had tried unaided to destroy man before—and had failed. And her unholy alliance with man’s genius would also fail.

She wondered as she walked down the corridor if the others who had sickened and died felt as she did. She speculated with grim amusement whether Walter Kramer would be as impersonal as he was with the others, when he performed the post-mortem on her body. She shivered at the thought of that bare sterile room and the shining table. Death was not a pretty thing. But she could meet it with resignation if not with courage. She had already seen too much for it to have any meaning. She did not falter as she placed a finger on the elevator button.

Poor Walter—she sighed. Sometimes it was harder to be among the living. It was good that she didn’t let him know how she felt. She had sensed a change in him recently. His friendly impersonality had become merely friendly. It could, with a little encouragement, have developed into something else. But it wouldn’t now. She sighed again. His hardness had been a tower of strength. And his bitter gallows humor had furnished a wry relief to grim reality. It had been nice to work with him. She wondered if he would miss her. Her lips curled in a faint smile. He would, if only for the trouble he would have in making chaos out of the order she had created. Why couldn’t that elevator hurry?

* * * * *

"Mary! Where are you going?" Kramer’s voice was in her ears, and his hand was on her shoulder.
"Don't touch me!"
"Why not?" His voice was curiously different. Younger, excited.
"I have Thurston's Disease," she said.
He didn't let go. "Are you sure?"
"The presumptive tests were positive."
"Initial stages?"
She nodded. "I had the first coughing attack a few minutes ago."
He pulled her away from the elevator door that suddenly slid open. "You were going to that death trap upstairs," he said.
"Where else can I go?"
"With me," he said. "I think I can help you."
"How? Have you found a cure for the virus?"
"I think so. At least it's a better possibility than the things they're using up there." His voice was urgent. "And to think I might never have seen it if you hadn't put me on the track."
"Are you sure you're right?"
"Not absolutely, but the facts fit. The theory's good."
"Then I'm going to the clinic. I can't risk infecting you. I'm a carrier now. I can kill you, and you're too important to die."
"You don't know how wrong you are," Kramer said.
"Let go of me!"
"No—you're coming back!"
She twisted in his grasp. "Let me go!" she sobbed and broke into a fit of coughing worse than before.
"What I was trying to say," Dr. Kramer said into the silence that followed, "is that if you have Thurston's Disease, you've been a carrier for at least two weeks. If I am going to get it, your going away can't help. And if I'm not, I'm not."
"Do you come willingly or shall I knock you unconscious and drag you back?" Kramer asked.
She looked at his face. It was grimmer than she had ever seen it before. Numbly she let him lead her back to the laboratory.

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"But, Walter--I can't. That's sixty in the past ten hours!" she protested.
"Take it," he said grimly, "then take another. And inhale. Deeply."
"But they make me dizzy."
"Better dizzy than dead. And, by the way--how's your chest?"
"Better. There's no pain now. But the cough is worse."
"It should be."
"Why?"
"You've never smoked enough to get a cigarette cough," he said.
She shook her head dizzily. "You're so right," she said.
"And that's what nearly killed you," he finished triumphantly.
"Are you sure?"
"I'm certain. Naturally, I can't prove it--yet. But that's just a matter of time. Your response just about clinches it. Take a look at the records. Who gets this disease? Youngsters--with nearly one hundred per cent morbidity and one hundred per cent mortality. Adults--less than fifty per cent morbidity--and again one hundred per cent mortality. What makes the other fifty per cent immune? Your crack about leather lungs started me thinking--so I fed the data cards into the computer and keyed them for smoking versus incidence. And I found that not one heavy smoker had died of Thurston's Disease. Light smokers and nonsmokers--plenty of them--but not one single nicotine addict. And there were over ten thousand randomized cards in that spot check. And there's the exact reverse of that classic experiment the lung cancer boys used to sell their case. Among certain religious groups which prohibit smoking there was nearly one hundred per cent mortality of all ages!
"And so I thought since the disease was just starting in you, perhaps I could stop it if I loaded you with tobacco smoke. And it works!"
"You're not certain yet," Mary said. "I might not have had the disease."
"You had the symptoms. And there's virus in your sputum."
"Yes, but--"
"But, nothing! I've passed the word--and the boys in the other labs figure that there's merit in it. We're going to call it Barton's Therapy in your honor. It's going to cause a minor social revolution. A lot of laws are going to have to be rewritten. I can see where it's going to be illegal for children not to smoke. Funny, isn't it?"
"I've contacted the maternity ward. They have three babies still alive upstairs. We get all the newborn in this town, or didn't you know. Funny, isn't it, how we still try to reproduce. They're rigging a smoke chamber for the kids. The head nurse is screaming like a wounded tiger, but she'll feel better with live babies to care for. The only bad thing I can see is that it may cut down on her chain smoking. She's been worried a lot about infant mortality.
"And speaking of nurseries--that reminds me. I wanted to ask you something."
"Yes?"
"Will you marry me? I've wanted to ask you before, but I didn't dare. Now I think you owe me something--your life. And I'd like to take care of it from now on."
"Of course I will," Mary said. "And I have reasons, too. If I marry you, you can't possibly do that silly thing you plan."
"What thing?"
"Naming the treatment Barton's. It'll have to be Kramer's."
screamed over the old mission walls. Travis looked worried.

"What kind of guns?" he asked.

"Nothing to worry about, sir," Ord said. "Only a few one-pounders, nothing of respectable siege caliber. General Santa Anna has had to move too fast for any big stuff to keep up." Ord spoke in his odd accent. After all, he was a Britainer, or some other kind of foreigner. But he spoke good Spanish, and he seemed to know everything. In the four or five days since he had appeared he had become very useful to Travis.

Frowning, Travis asked, "How many Mexicans, do you think, Ord?"

"Not more than a thousand, now," the dark-haired, blue-eyed young man said confidently. "But when the main body arrives, there'll be four, five thousand."

Travis shook his head. "How do you get all this information, Ord? You recite it like you had read it all some place—like it were history."

Ord merely smiled. "Oh, I don't know everything, colonel. That is why I had to come here. There is so much we don't know about what happened.... I mean, sir, what will happen—in the Alamo." His sharp eyes grew puzzled for an instant. "And some things don't seem to match up, somehow—"

Travis looked at him sympathetically. Ord talked queerly at times, and Travis suspected he was a bit deranged. This was understandable, for the man was undoubtedly a Britainer aristocrat, a refugee from Napoleon's thousand-year Empire. Travis had heard about the detention camps and the charcoal ovens ... but once, when he had mentioned the Empereur's sack of London in '06, Ord had gotten a very queer look in his eyes, as if he had forgotten completely.

But John Ord, or whatever his name was, seemed to be the only man in the Texas forces who understood what William Barrett Travis was trying to do. Now Travis looked around at the thick adobe wall surrounding the old mission in which they stood. In the cold, yellowish twilight even the flaring cook fires of his hundred and eighty-two men could not dispel the ghostly air that clung to the old place. Travis shivered involuntarily. But the walls were thick, and they could turn one-pounders. He asked, "What was it you called this place, Ord ... the Mexican name?"

"The Alamo, sir." A slow, steady excitement seemed to burn in the Britainer's bright eyes. "Santa Anna won't forget that name, you can be sure. You'll want to talk to the other officers now, sir? About the message we drew up for Sam Houston?"

"Yes, of course," Travis said absently. He watched Ord head for the walls. No doubt about it, Ord understood what William Barrett Travis was trying to do here. So few of the others seemed to care.

Travis was suddenly very glad that John Ord had shown up when he did.

On the walls, Ord found the man he sought, broad-shouldered and tall in a fancy Mexican jacket. "The commandant's compliments, sir, and he desires your presence in the chapel."

The big man put away the knife with which he had been whittling. The switchblade snicked back and disappeared into a side pocket of the jacket, while Ord watched it with fascinated eyes. "What's old Bill got his britches hot about this time?" the big man asked.

"I wouldn't know, sir," Ord said stiffly and moved on.

Bang-bang-bang roared the small Mexican cannon from across the river. Pow-pow-pow! The little balls only chipped dust from the thick adobe walls. Ord smiled.

He found the second man he sought, a lean man with a weathered face, leaning against a wall and chewing tobacco. This man wore a long, fringed, leather lounge jacket, and he carried a guitar slung beside his Rock Island rifle. He squinted up at Ord. "I know ... I know," he muttered. "Willy Travis is in an uproar again. You reckon that colonel's commission that Congress up in Washington-on-the-Brazos give him swelled his head?"

Rather stiffly, Ord said, "Colonel, the commandant desires an officers' conference in the chapel, now." Ord was somewhat annoyed. He had not realized he would find these Americans so—distasteful. Hardly preferable to Mexicans, really. Not at all as he had imagined.

For an instant he wished he had chosen Drake and the Armada instead of this pack of ruffians—but no, he had never been able to stand sea sickness. He couldn't have taken the Channel, not even for five minutes.

And there was no changing now. He had chosen this place and time carefully, at great expense—actually, at great risk, for the X-4-A had aborted twice, and he had had a hard time bringing her in. But it had got him here at last. And, because for a historian he had always been an impetuous and daring man, he grinned now, thinking of the glory that was to come. And he was a participant—much better than a ringside seat! Only he would have to be careful, at the last, to slip away.

John Ord knew very well how this coming battle had ended, back here in 1836.

He marched back to William Barrett Travis, clicked heels smartly. Travis' eyes glowed; he was the only senior officer here who loved military punctilio. "Sir, they are on the way."

"Thank you, Ord," Travis hesitated a moment. "Look, Ord. There will be a battle, as we know. I know so little
about you. If something should happen to you, is there anyone to write? Across the water?"

Ord grinned. "No, sir. I'm afraid my ancestor wouldn't understand."

Travis shrugged. Who was he to say that Ord was crazy? In this day and age, any man with vision was looked on as mad. Sometimes he felt closer to Ord than to the others.

The two officers Ord had summoned entered the chapel. The big man in the Mexican jacket tried to dominate the wood table at which they sat. He towered over the slender, nervous Travis, but the commandant, straight-backed and arrogant, did not give an inch. "Boys, you know Santa Anna has invested us. We've been fired on all day—" He seemed to be listening for something. Wham! Outside, a cannon split the dusk with flame and sound as it fired from the walls. "There is my answer!"

The man in the lounge coat shrugged. "What I want to know is what our orders are. What does old Sam say? Sam and me were in Congress once. Sam's got good sense; he can smell the way the wind's blowin'." He stopped speaking and hit his guitar a few licks. He winked across the table at the officer in the Mexican jacket who took out his knife. "Eh, Jim?"

"Right," Jim said. "Sam's a good man, although I don't think he ever met a payroll."

"General Houston's leaving it up to me," Travis told them.

"Well, that's that," Jim said unhappily. "So what you figurin' to do, Bill?"

Travis stood up in the weak, flickering candlelight, one hand on the polished hilt of his saber. The other two men winced, watching him. "Gentlemen, Houston's trying to pull his militia together while he falls back. You know, Texas was woefully unprepared for a contest at arms. The general's idea is to draw Santa Anna as far into Texas as he can, then hit him when he's extended, at the right place, and right time. But Houston needs more time—Santa Anna's moved faster than any of us anticipated. Unless we can stop the Mexican Army and take a little steam out of them, General Houston's in trouble."

Jim flicked the knife blade in and out. "Go on."

"This is where we come in, gentlemen. Santa Anna can't leave a force of one hundred eighty men in his rear. If we hold fast, he must attack us. But he has no siege equipment, not even large field cannon." Travis' eye gleamed. "Think of it, boys! He'll have to mount a frontal attack, against protected American riflemen. Ord, couldn't your Englishers tell him a few things about that!"

"Whoa, now," Jim barked. "Billy, anybody tell you there's maybe four or five thousand Mexicaners comin'?"

"Let them come. Less will leave!"

But Jim, sour-faced turned to the other man. "Davey? You got something to say?"

"Hell, yes. How do we get out, after we done pinned Santa Anna down? You thought of that, Billy boy?"

Travis shrugged. "There is an element of grave risk, of course. Ord, where's the document, the message you wrote up for me? Ah, thank you." Travis cleared his throat. "Here's what I'm sending on to general Houston." He read, "Commandancy of the Alamo, February 24, 1836 ... are you sure of that date, Ord?"

"Oh, I'm sure of that," Ord said.

"Never mind—if you're wrong we can change it later. To the People of Texas and all Americans in the World. Fellow Freemen and Compatriots! I am besieged with a thousand or more Mexicans under Santa Anna. I have sustained a continual bombardment for many hours but have not lost a man. The enemy has demanded surrender at discretion, otherwise, the garrison is to be put to the sword, if taken. I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, and our flag still waves proudly over the walls. I shall never surrender or retreat. Then, I call on you in the name of liberty, of patriotism and everything dear to the American character—" He paused, frowning, "This language seems pretty old-fashioned, Ord—"

"Oh, no, sir. That's exactly right," Ord murmured.

"... To come to our aid with all dispatch. The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily and will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due his honor or that of his homeland. VICTORY OR DEATH!"

Travis stopped reading, looked up. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" Ord breathed. "The greatest words of defiance ever written in the English tongue—and so much more literate than that chap at Bascogne."

"You mean to send that?" Jim gasped.

The man called Davey was holding his head in his hands.

"You object, Colonel Bowie?" Travis asked icily.

"Oh, cut that 'colonel' stuff, Bill," Bowie said. "It's only a National Guard title, and I like 'Jim' better, even though I am a pretty important man. Damn right I have an objection! Why, that message is almost aggressive. You'd think we wanted to fight Santa Anna! You want us to be marked down as warmongers? It'll give us trouble when we get to the negotiation table—"
Travis' head turned. "Colonel Crockett?"

"What Jim says goes for me, too. And this: I'd change that part about all Americans, et cetera. You don't want anybody to think we think we're better than the Mexicans. After all, Americans are a minority in the world. Why not make it 'all men who love security?' That'd have world-wide appeal—"

"Oh, Crockett," Travis hissed.

Crockett stood up. "Don't use that tone of voice to me, Billy Travis! That piece of paper you got don't make you no better'n us. I ran for Congress twice, and won. I know what the people want—"

"What the people want doesn't mean a damn right now," Travis said harshly. "Don't you realize the tyrant is at the gates?"

Crockett rolled his eyes heavenward. "Never thought I'd hear a good American say that! Billy, you'll never run for office—"

Bowie held up a hand, cutting into Crockett's talk. "All right, Davey. Hold up. You ain't runnin' for Congress now. Bill, the main thing I don't like in your whole message is that part about victory or death. That's got to go. Don't ask us to sell that to the troops!"

Travis closed his eyes briefly. "Boys, listen. We don't have to tell the men about this. They don't need to know the real story until it's too late for them to get out. And then we shall cover ourselves with such glory that none of us shall ever be forgotten. Americans are the best fighters in the world when they are trapped. They teach this in the Foot School back on the Chatahoochee. And if we die, to die for one's country is sweet—"

"Hell with that," Crockett drawled. "I don't mind dyin', but not for these big landowners like Jim Bowie here. I just been thinkin'—I don't own nothing in Texas."

"I resent that," Bowie shouted. "You know very well I volunteered, after I sent my wife off to Acapulco to be with her family." With an effort, he calmed himself. "Look, Travis. I have some reputation as a fighting man—you know I lived through the gang wars back home. It's obvious this Alamo place is indefensible, even if we had a thousand men."

"But we must delay Santa Anna at all costs—"

Bowie took out a fine, dark Mexican cigar and whittled at it with his blade. Then he lit it, saying around it, "All right, let's all calm down. Nothing a group of good men can't settle around a table. Now listen. I got in with this revolution at first because I thought old Emperor Iturbide would listen to reason and lower taxes. But nothin's worked out, because hot-heads like you, Travis, queered the deal. All this yammerin' about liberty! Mexico is a Republic, under an Emperor, not some kind of democracy, and we can't change that. Let's talk some sense before it's too late. We're all too old and too smart to be wavin' the flag like it's the Fourth of July. Sooner or later, we're goin' to have to sit down and talk with the Mexicans. And like Davey said, I own a million hectares, and I've always paid minimum wage, and my wife's folks are way up there in the Imperial Government of the Republic of Mexico. That means I got influence in all the votin' groups, includin' the American Immigrant, since I'm a minority group member myself. I think I can talk to Santa Anna, and even to old Iturbide. If we sign a treaty now with Santa Anna, acknowledge the law of the land, I think our lives and property rights will be respected—" He cocked an eye toward Crockett.

"Makes sense, Jim. That's the way we do it in Congress. Compromise, everybody happy. We never allowed ourselves to be led nowhere we didn't want to go, I can tell you! And Bill, you got to admit that we're in better bargaining position if we're out in the open, than if old Santa Anna's got us penned up in this old Alamo."

"Ord," Travis said despairingly. "Ord, you understand. Help me! Make them listen!"

Ord moved into the candlelight, his lean face sweating. "Gentlemen, this is all wrong! It doesn't happen this way—"

Crockett sneered, "Who asked you, Ord? I'll bet you ain't even got a poll tax!"

Decisively, Bowie said, "We're free men, Travis, and we won't be led around like cattle. How about it, Davey? Think you could handle the rear guard, if we try to move out of here?"

"Hell, yes! Just so we're movin'!"

"O.K. Put it to a vote of the men outside. Do we stay, and maybe get croaked, or do we fall back and conserve our strength until we need it? Take care of it, eh, Davey?"

Crockett picked up his guitar and went outside.

Travis roared, "This is insubordination! Treason!" He drew his saber, but Bowie took it from him and broke it in two. Then the big man pulled his knife.

"Stay back, Ord. The Alamo isn't worth the bones of a Britainer, either."

"Colonel Bowie, please," Ord cried. "You don't understand! You must defend the Alamo! This is the turning point in the winning of the west! If Houston is beaten, Texas will never join the Union! There will be no Mexican War. No California, no nation stretching from sea to shining sea! This is the Americans' manifest destiny. You are
the hope of the future ... you will save the world from Hitler, from Bolshevism"

"Crazy as a hoot owl," Bowie said sadly. "Ord, you and Travis got to look at it both ways. We ain't all in the right in this war—we Americans got our faults, too."

"But you are free men," Ord whispered. "Vulgar, opinionated, brutal—but free! You are still better than any breed who kneels to tyranny—"

Crockett came in. "O.K., Jim."

"How'd it go?"

"Fifty-one per cent for hightailin' it right now."

Bowie smiled. "That's a flat majority. Let's make tracks."

"Comin', Bill?" Crockett asked. "You're O.K., but you just don't know how to be one of the boys. You got to learn that no dog is better'n any other."

"No," Travis croaked hoarsely. "I stay. Stay or go, we shall all die like dogs, anyway. Boys, for the last time! Don't reveal our weakness to the enemy—"

"What weakness? We're stronger than them. Americans could whip the Mexicans any day, if we wanted to. But the thing to do is make 'em talk, not fight. So long, Bill."

The two big men stepped outside. In the night there was a sudden clatter of hoofs as the Texans mounted and rode. From across the river came a brief spatter of musket fire, then silence. In the dark, there had been no difficulty in breaking through the Mexican lines.

Inside the chapel, John Ord's mouth hung slackly. He muttered, "Am I insane? It didn't happen this way—it couldn't! The books can't be that wrong—"

In the candlelight, Travis hung his head. "We tried, John. Perhaps it was a forlorn hope at best. Even if we had defeated Santa Anna, or delayed him, I do not think the Indian Nations would have let Houston get help from the United States."

Ord continued his dazed muttering, hardly hearing.

"We need a contiguous frontier with Texas," Travis continued slowly, just above a whisper. "But we Americans have never broken a treaty with the Indians, and pray God we never shall. We aren't like the Mexicans, always pushing, always grabbing off New Mexico, Arizona, California. We aren't colonial oppressors, thank God! No, it wouldn't have worked out, even if we American immigrants had secured our rights in Texas—"

He lifted a short, heavy, percussion pistol in his hand and cocked it. "I hate to say it, but perhaps if we hadn't taken Payne and Jefferson so seriously—if we could only have paid lip service, and done what we really wanted to do, in our hearts ... no matter. I won't live to see our final disgrace."

He put the pistol to his head and blew out his brains.

Ord was still gibbering when the Mexican cavalry stormed into the old mission, pulling down the flag and seizing him, dragging him before the resplendent little general in green and gold.

Since he was the only prisoner, Santa Anna questioned Ord carefully. When the sharp point of a bayonet had been thrust half an inch into his stomach, the Britainer seemed to come around. When he started speaking, and the Mexicans realized he was English, it went better with him. Ord was obviously mad, it seemed to Santa Anna, but since he spoke English and seemed educated, he could be useful. Santa Anna didn't mind the raving; he understood all about Napoleon's detention camps and what they had done to Britainers over there. In fact, Santa Anna was thinking of setting up a couple of those camps himself. When they had milked Ord dry, they threw him on a horse and took him along.

Thus John Ord had an excellent view of the battlefield when Santa Anna's cannon broke the American lines south of the Trinity. Unable to get his men across to safety, Sam Houston died leading the last, desperate charge against the Mexican regulars. After that, the American survivors were too tired to run from the cavalry that pinned them against the flooding river. Most of them died there. Santa Anna expressed complete indifference to what happened to the Texans' women and children.

Mexican soldiers found Jim Bowie hiding in a hut, wearing a plain linen tunic and pretending to be a civilian. They would not have discovered his identity had not some of the Texan women cried out, "Colonel Bowie—Colonel Bowie!" as he was led into the Mexican camp.

He was hauled before Santa Anna, and Ord was summoned to watch. "Well, don Jaime," Santa Anna remarked, "You have been a foolish man. I promised your wife's uncle to send you to Acapulco safely, though of course your lands are forfeit. You understand we must have lands for the veterans' program when this campaign is over—"

Santa Anna smiled then. "Besides, since Ord here has told me how instrumental you were in the abandonment of the Alamo, I think the Emperor will agree to mercy in your case. You know, don Jaime, your compatriots had me worried back there. The Alamo might have been a tough nut to crack ... pues, no matter."

And since Santa Anna had always been broadminded, not objecting to light skin or immigrant background, he
invited Bowie to dinner that night.

Santa Anna turned to Ord. "But if we could catch this rascally war criminal, Crockett ... however, I fear he has escaped us. He slipped over the river with a fake passport, and the Indians have interned him."

"Sí, Señor Presidente," Ord said dully.

"Please, don't call me that," Santa Anna cried, looking around. "True, many of us officers have political ambitions, but Emperor Iturbide is old and vain. It could mean my head—"

Suddenly, Ord's head was erect, and the old, clear light was in his blue eyes. "Now I understand!" he shouted. "I thought Travis was raving back there, before he shot himself—and your talk of the Emperor! American respect for Indian rights! Jeffersonian form of government! Oh, those pones who peddled me that X-4-A—the track jumper! I'm not back in my own past. I've jumped the time track—I'm back in a screaming alternate!"

"Please, not so loud, Señor Ord," Santa Anna sighed. "Now, we must shoot a few more American officers, of course. I regret this, you understand, and I shall no doubt be much criticized in French Canada and Russia, where there are still civilized values. But we must establish the Republic of the Empire once and for all upon this continent, that aristocratic tyranny shall not perish from the earth. Of course, as an Englishman, you understand perfectly, Señor Ord."

"Of course, excellency," Ord said.

"There are soft hearts—soft heads, I say—in Mexico who cry for civil rights for the Americans. But I must make sure that Mexican dominance is never again threatened north of the Rio Grande."

"Seguro, excellency," Ord said, suddenly. If the bloody X-4-A had jumped the track, there was no getting back, none at all. He was stuck here. Ord's blue eyes narrowed. "After all, it ... it is manifest destiny that the Latin peoples of North America meet at the center of the continent. Canada and Mexico shall share the Mississippi."

Santa Anna's dark eyes glowed. "You say what I have often thought. You are a man of vision, and much sense. You realize the Indios must go, whether they were here first or not. I think I will make you my secretary, with the rank of captain."

"Gracias, Excellency."

"Now, let us write my communique to the capital, Capitán Ord. We must describe how the American abandonment of the Alamo allowed me to press the traitor Houston so closely he had no chance to maneuver his men into the trap he sought. Ay, Capitán, it is a cardinal principle of the Anglo-Saxons, to get themselves into a trap from which they must fight their way out. This I never let them do, which is why I succeed where others fail ... you said something, Capitán?"

"Sí, Excellency. I said, I shall title our communique: 'Remember the Alamo,'" Ord said, standing at attention. "Bueno! You have a gift for words. Indeed, if ever we feel the gringos are too much for us, your words shall once again remind us of the truth!" Santa Anna smiled. "I think I shall make you a major. You have indeed coined a phrase which shall live in history forever!"
His "planet" was the smallest in the solar system, and the loneliest, Thad Allen was thinking, as he straightened wearily in the huge, bulging, inflated fabric of his Osprey space armor. Walking awkwardly in the magnetic boots that held him to the black mass of meteoric iron, he mounted a projection and stood motionless, staring moodily away through the vision panels of his bulky helmet into the dark mystery of the void.

His welding arc dangled at his belt, the electrode still glowing red. He had just finished securing to this slowly-accumulated mass of iron his most recent find, a meteorite the size of his head.

Five perilous weeks he had labored, to collect this rugged lump of metal—a jagged mass, some ten feet in diameter, composed of hundreds of fragments, that he had captured and welded together. His luck had not been good. His findings had been heart-breakingly small; the spectro-flash analysis had revealed that the content of the precious metals was disappointingly minute.[1]

[Footnote 1: The meteor or asteroid belt, between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, is "mined" by such adventurers as Thad Allen for the platinum, iridium and osmium that all meteoric irons contain in small quantities. The meteor swarms are supposed by some astronomers to be fragments of a disrupted planet, which, according to Bode's Law, should occupy this space.]

On the other side of this tiny sphere of hard-won treasure, his Millen atomic rocket was sputtering, spurts of hot blue flame jetting from its exhaust. A simple mechanism, bolted to the first sizable fragment he had captured, it drove the iron ball through space like a ship.

Through the magnetic soles of his insulated boots, Thad could feel the vibration of the iron mass, beneath the rocket's regular thrust. The magazine of uranite fuel capsules was nearly empty, now, he reflected. He would soon have to turn back toward Mars.

Turn back. But how could he, with so slender a reward for his efforts? Meteor mining is expensive. There was his bill at Millen and Helion, Mars, for uranite and supplies. And the unpaid last instalment on his Osprey suit. How could he outfit himself again, if he returned with no more metal than this? There were men who averaged a thousand tons of iron a month. Why couldn't fortune smile on him?

He knew men who had made fabulous strikes, who had captured whole planetoids of rich metal, and he knew weary, white-haired men who had braved the perils of vacuum and absolute cold and bullet-swift meteors for hard years, who still hoped.

But sometime fortune had to smile, and then....

The picture came to him. A tower of white metal, among the low red hills near Helion. A slim, graceful tower of argent, rising in a fragrant garden of flowering Martian shrubs, purple and saffron. And a girl waiting, at the silver door—a trim, slender girl in white, with blue eyes and hair richly brown.

Thad had seen the white tower many times, on his holiday tramps through the hills about Helion. He had even dared to ask if it could be bought, to find that its price was an amount that he might not amass in many years at his perilous profession. But the girl in white was yet only a glorious dream....

* * * * *

The strangeness of interplanetary space, and the somber mystery of it, pressed upon him like an illimitable and deserted ocean. The sun was a tiny white disk on his right, hanging between rosy coronal wings; his native Earth, a bright greenish point suspended in the dark gulf below it; Mars, nearer, smaller, a little ochre speck above the shrunken sun. Above him, below him, in all directions was vastness, blackness, emptiness. Ebon infinity, sprinkled with far, cold stars.

Thad was alone. Utterly alone. No man was visible, in all the supernal vastness of space. And no work of man—save the few tools of his daring trade, and the glittering little rocket bolted to the black iron behind him. It was terrible to think that the nearest human being must be tens of millions of miles away.

On his first trips, the loneliness had been terrible, unendurable. Now he was becoming accustomed to it. At least, he no longer feared that he was going mad. But sometimes....

Thad shook himself and spoke aloud, his voice ringing hollow in his huge metal helmet:

"Brace up, old top. In good company, when you're by yourself, as Dad used to say. Be back in Helion in a week or so, anyhow. Look up Dan and 'Chuck' and the rest of the crowd again, at Comet's place. What price a friendly boxing match with Mason, or an evening at the teleview theater?
"Fresh air instead of this stale synthetic stuff! Real food, in place of these tasteless concentrates! A hot bath, instead of greasing yourself!"

"Too dull out here. Life--" He broke off, set his jaw.

No use thinking about such things. Only made it worse. Besides, how did he know that a whirring meteor wasn't going to flash him out before he got back?

* * * * *

He drew his right arm out of the bulging sleeve of the suit, into its ample interior, found a cigarette in an inside pocket, and lighted it. The smoke swirled about in the helmet, drawn swiftly into the air filters.

"Darn clever, these suits," he murmured. "Food, smokes, water generator, all where you can reach them. And darned expensive, too. I'd better be looking for pay metal!"

He clambered to a better position; stood peering out into space, searching for the tiny gleam of sunlight on a meteoric fragment that might be worth capturing for its content of precious metals. For an hour he scanned the black, star-strewn gulf, as the sputtering rocket continued to drive him forward.

"There she glows!" he cried suddenly, and grinned.

Before him was a tiny, glowing fleck, that moved among the unchanging stars. He stared at it intensely, breathing faster in the helmet.

Always he thrilled to see such a moving gleam. What treasure it promised! At first sight, it was impossible to determine size or distance or rate of motion. It might be ten thousand tons of rich metal. A fortune! It would more probably prove to be a tiny, stony mass, not worth capturing. It might even be large and valuable, but moving so rapidly that he could not overtake it with the power of the diminutive Millen rocket.

He studied the tiny speck intently, with practised eye, as the minutes passed—an untrained eye would never have seen it at all, among the flaming hosts of stars. Skilfully he judged, from its apparent rate of motion and its slow increase in brilliance, its size and distance from him.

"Must be--must be fair size," he spoke aloud, at length. "A hundred tons, I'll bet my helmet! But scooting along pretty fast. Stretch the little old rocket to run it down."

He clambered back to the rocket, changed the angle of the flaming exhaust, to drive him directly across the path of the object ahead, filled the magazine again with the little pellets of uranite, which were fed automatically into the combustion chamber, and increased the firing rate.

The trailing blue flame reached farther backward from the incandescent orifice of the exhaust. The vibration of the metal sphere increased. Thad left the sputtering rocket and went back where he could see the object before him.

* * * * *

It was nearer now, rushing obliquely across his path. Would he be in time to capture it as it passed, or would it hurtle by ahead of him, and vanish in the limitless darkness of space before his feeble rocket could check the momentum of his ball of metal?

He peered at it, as it drew closer.

Its surface seemed oddly bright, silvery. Not the dull black of meteoric iron. And it was larger, more distant, than he had thought at first. In form, too, it seemed curiously regular, ellipsoid. It was no jagged mass of metal.

His hopes sank, rose again immediately. Even if it were not the mass of rich metal for which he had prayed, it might be something as valuable—and more interesting.

He returned to the rocket, adjusted the angle of the nozzle again, and advanced the firing time slightly, even at the risk of a ruinous explosion.

When he returned to where he could see the hurtling object before him, he saw that it was a ship. A tapering silver-green rocket-flier.

Once more his dreams were dashed. The officers of interplanetary liners lose no love upon the meteor miners, claiming that their collected masses of metal, almost helpless, always underpowered, are menaces to navigation. Thad could expect nothing from the ship save a heliographed warning to keep clear.

But how came a rocket-flier here, in the perilous swarms of the meteor belt? Many a vessel had been destroyed by collision with an asteroid, in the days before charted lanes were cleared of drifting metal.

The lanes more frequently used, between Earth, Mars, Venus and Mercury, were of course far inside the orbits of the asteroids. And the few ships running to Jupiter's moons avoided them by crossing millions of miles above their plane.

Could it be that legendary green ship, said once to have mysteriously appeared, sliced up and drawn within her hull several of the primitive ships of that day, and then disappeared forever after in the remote wastes of space? Absurd, of course: he dismissed the idle fancy and examined the ship still more closely.

Then he saw that it was turning, end over end, very slowly. That meant that its gyros were stopped; that it was helpless, drifting, disabled, powerless to avoid hurtling meteoric stones. Had it blundered unawares into the belt of
swarms--been struck before the danger was realized? Was it a derelict, with all dead upon it?

* * * * *

Either the ship's machinery was completely wrecked, Thad knew, or there was no one on watch. For the controls of a modern rocket-flier are so simple and so nearly automatic that a single man at the bridge can keep a vessel upon her course.

It might be, he thought, that a meteorite had ripped open the hull, allowing the air to escape so quickly that the entire crew had been asphyxiated before any repairs could be made. But that seemed unlikely, since the ship must have been divided into several compartments by air-tight bulkheads.

Could the vessel have been deserted for some reason? The crew might have mutinied, and left her in the life-tubes. She might have been robbed by pirates, and set adrift. But with the space lanes policed as they were, piracy and successful mutiny were rare.

Thad saw that the flier's navigation lights were out.

He found the heliograph signal mirror at his side, sighted it upon the ship, and worked the mirror rapidly. He waited, repeated the call. There was no response.

The vessel was plainly a derelict. Could he board her, and take her to Mars? By law, it was his duty to attempt to aid any helpless ship, or at least to try to save any endangered lives upon her. And the salvage award, if the ship should be deserted and he could bring her safe to port, would be half her value.

No mean prize, that. Half the value of ship and cargo! More than he was apt to earn in years of mining the meteor-belt.

With new anxiety, he measured the relative motion of the gleaming ship. It was going to pass ahead of him. And very soon. No more time for speculation. It was still uncertain whether it would come near enough so that he could get a line to it.

Rapidly he unslung from his belt the apparatus he used to capture meteors. A powerful electromagnet, with a thin, strong wire fastened to it, to be hurled from a helix-gun. He set the drum on which the wire was wound upon the metal at his feet, fastened it with its magnetic anchor, wondering if it would stand the terrific strain when the wire tightened.

Raising the helix to his shoulder, he trained it upon a point well ahead of the rushing flier, and stood waiting for the exact moment to press the lever. The slender spindle of the ship was only a mile away now, bright in the sunlight. He could see no break in her polished hull, save for the dark rows of circular ports. She was not, by any means, completely wrecked.

He read the black letters of her name.

_ Red Dragon._

The name of her home port, below, was in smaller letters. But in a moment he made them out. San Francisco. The ship then came from the Earth! From the very city where Thad was born!

* * * * *

The gleaming hull was near now. Only a few hundred yards away. Passing. Aiming well ahead of her, to allow for her motion, Thad pressed the key that hurled the magnet from the helix. It flung away from him, the wire screaming from the reel behind it.

Thad's mass of metal swung on past the ship, as he returned to the rocket and stopped its clattering explosions. He watched the tiny black speck of the magnet. It vanished from sight in the darkness of space, appeared again against the white, burnished hull of the rocket ship.

For a painful instant he thought he had missed. Then he saw that the magnet was fast to the side of the flier, near the stern. The line tightened. Soon the strain would come upon it, as it checked the momentum of the mass of iron. He set the friction brake.

Thad flung himself flat, grasped the wire above the reel. Even if the mass of iron tore itself free, he could hold to the wire, and himself reach the ship.

He flung past the deserted vessel, behind it, his lump of iron swung like a pebble in a sling. A cloud of smoke burst from the burned lining of the friction brake, in the reel. Then the wire was all out; there was a sudden jerk.

And the hard-gathered sphere of metal was gone--snapped off into space. Thad clung desperately to the wire, muscles cracking, tortured arms almost drawn from their sockets. Fear flashed over his mind; what if the wire broke, and left him floating helpless in space?

* * * * *

It held, though, to his relief. He was trailing behind the ship. Eagerly he seized the handle of the reel; began to wind up the mile of thin wire. Half an hour later, Thad's suited figure bumped gently against the shining hull of the rocket. He got to his feet, and gazed backward into the starry gulf, where his sphere of iron had long since vanished.

"Somebody is going to find himself a nice chunk of metal, all welded together and equipped for rocket
navigation," he murmured. "As for me--well, I've simply got to run this tub to Mars!"

He walked over the smooth, refulgent hull, held to it by magnetic soles. Nowhere was it broken, though he found scars where small meteoric particles had scratched the brilliant polish. So no meteor had wrecked the ship. What, then, was the matter? Soon he would know.

The _Red Dragon_ was not large. A hundred and thirty feet long, Thad estimated, with a beam of twenty-five feet. But her trim lines bespoke design recent and good; the double ring of black projecting rockets at the stern told of unusual speed.

A pretty piece of salvage, he reflected, if he could land her on Mars. Half the value of such a ship, unharmed and safe in port, would be a larger sum than he dared put in figures. And he must take her in, now that he had lost his own rocket!

He found the life-tubes, six of them, slender, silvery cylinders, lying secure in their niches, three along each side of the flier. None was missing. So the crew had not willingly deserted the ship.

He approached the main air-lock, at the center of the hull, behind the projecting dome of the bridge. It was closed. A glance at the dials told him there was full air pressure within it. It had, then, last been used to enter the rocket, not to leave it.

* * * * *

Thad opened the exhaust valve, let the air hiss from the chamber of the lock. The huge door swung open in response to his hand upon the wheel, and he entered the cylindrical chamber. In a moment the door was closed behind him, air was hissing into the lock again.

He started to open the face-plate of his helmet, longing for a breath of air that did not smell of sweat and stale tobacco smoke, as that in his suit always did, despite the best chemical purifiers. Then he hesitated. Perhaps some deadly gas, from the combustion chambers....

Thad opened the inner valve, and came upon the upper deck of the vessel. A floor ran the full length of the ship, broken with hatches and companionways that gave to the rocket rooms, cargo holds, and quarters for crew and passengers below. There was an enclosed ladder that led to bridge and navigating room in the dome above. The hull formed an arched roof over it.

The deck was deserted, lit only by three dim blue globes, hanging from the curved roof. All seemed in order--the fire-fighting equipment hanging on the walls, and the huge metal patches and welding equipment for repairing breaks in the hull. Everything was clean, bright with polish or new paint.

And all was very still. The silence held a vague, brooding threat that frightened Thad, made him wish for a moment that he was back upon his rugged ball of metal. But he banished his fear, and strode down the deck.

Midway of it he found a dark stain upon the clean metal. The black of long-dried blood. A few tattered scraps of cloth beside it. No more than bloody rags. And a heavy meat cleaver, half hidden beneath a bit of darkened fabric.

Mute record of tragedy! Thad strove to read it. Had a man fought here and been killed? It must have been a struggle of peculiar violence, to judge by the dark spattered stains, and the indescribable condition of the remnants of clothing. But what had he fought? Another man, or some thing? And what had become of victor and vanquished?

He walked on down the deck.

The torturing silence was broken by the abrupt patter of quick little footsteps behind him. He turned quickly, nervously, with a hand going instinctively to his welding arc, which, he knew, would make a fairly effective weapon.

* * * * *

It was merely a dog. A little dog, yellow, nondescript, pathetically delighted. With a sharp, eager bark, it leaped up at Thad, pawing at his armor and licking it, standing on its hind legs and reaching toward the visor of his helmet.

It was very thin, as if from long starvation. Both ears were ragged and bloody, and there was a long, unhealed scratch across the shoulder, somewhat inflamed, but not a serious wound.

The bright, eager eyes were alight with joy. But Thad thought he saw fear in them. And even through the stiff fabric of the Osprey suit, he felt that the dog was trembling.

Suddenly, with a low whine, it shrank close to his side. And another sound reached Thad's ears.

A cry, weird and harrowing beyond telling. A scream so thin and so high that it roughened his skin, so keenly shrill that it tortured his nerves; a sound of that peculiar frequency that is more agonizing than any bodily pain.

When silence came again, Thad was standing with his back against the wall, the welding arc in his hand. His face was cold with sweat, and a queer chill prickled up and down his spine. The yellow dog crouched whimpering against his legs.

Ominous, threatening stillness filled the ship again, disturbed only by the whimpers and frightened growls of the dog. Trying to calm his overwrought nerves, Thad listened--strained his ears. He could hear nothing. And he had no idea from which direction the terrifying sound had come.
A strange cry. Thad knew it had been born in no human throat. Nor in the throat of any animal he knew. It had carried an alien note that overcame him with instinctive fear and horror. What had voiced it? Was the ship haunted by some dread entity?

* * * * *

For many minutes Thad stood upon the deck, waiting, tensely grasping the welding tool. But the nerve-shattering scream did not come again. Nor any other sound. The yellow dog seemed half to forget its fear. It leaped up at his face again, with another short little bark.

The air must be good, he thought, if the dog could live in it.

He unscrewed the face-plate of his helmet, and lifted it. The air that struck his face was cool and clean. He breathed deeply, gratefully. And at first he did not notice the strange odor upon it: a curious, unpleasant scent, earthly, almost fetid, unfamiliar.

The dog kept leaping up, whining.

"Hungry, boy?" Thad whispered.

He fumbled in the bulky inside pockets of his suit, found a slab of concentrated food, and tossed it out through the opened panel. The dog sprang upon it, wolfed it eagerly, and came back to his side.

Thad set at once about exploring the ship.

First he ascended the ladder to the bridge. A metal dome covered it, studded with transparent ports. Charts and instruments were in order. And the room was vacant, heavy with the fatal silence of the ship.

* * * * *

Thad had no expert's knowledge of the flier's mechanism. But he had studied interplanetary navigation, to qualify for his license to carry masses of metal under rocket power through the space lanes and into planetary atmospheres. He was sure he could manage the ship if its mechanism were in good order, though he was uncertain of his ability to make any considerable repairs.

To his relief, a scrutiny of the dials revealed nothing wrong.

He started the gyro motors, got the great wheels to spinning, and thus stopped the slow, end-over-end turning of the flier. Then he went to the rocket controls, warmed three of the tubes, and set them to firing. The vessel answered readily to her helm. In a few minutes he had the red fleck of Mars over the bow.

"Yes, I can run her, all right," he announced to the dog, which had followed him up the steps, keeping close to his feet. "Don't worry, old boy. We'll be eating a juicy beefsteak together, in a week. At Comet's place in Helion, down by the canal. Not much style--but the eats!

"And now we're going to do a little detective work, and find out what made that disagreeable noise. And what happened to all your fellow-astronauts. Better find out, before it happens to us!"

He shut off the rockets, and climbed down from the bridge again.

When Thad started down the companionway to the officers' quarters, in the central one of the five main compartments of the ship, the dog kept close to his legs, growling, trembling, hackles lifted. Sensing the animal's terror, pitying it for the naked fear in its eyes, Thad wondered what dramas of horror it might have seen.

The cabins of the navigator, calculator, chief technician, and first officer were empty, and forbidding with the ominous silence of the ship. They were neatly in order, and the berths had been made since they were used. But there was a large bloodstain, black and circular, on the floor of the calculator's room.

The captain's cabin held evidence of a violent struggle. The door had been broken in. Its fragments, with pieces of broken furniture, books, covers from the berth, and three service pistols, were scattered about in indescribable confusion, all stained with blood. Among the frightful debris, Thad found several scraps of clothing, of dissimilar fabrics. The guns were empty.

* * * * *

Attempting to reconstruct the action of the tragedy from those grim clues, he imagined that the five officers, aware of some peril, had gathered here, fought, and died.

The dog refused to enter the room. It stood at the door, looking anxiously after him, trembling and whimpering pitifully. Several times it sniffed the air and drew back, snarling. Thad thought that the unpleasant earthy odor he had noticed upon opening the face-plate of his helmet was stronger here.

After a few minutes of searching through the wildly disordered room, he found the ship's log--or its remains. Many pages had been torn from the book, and the remainder, soaked with blood, formed a stiff black mass.

Only one legible entry did he find, that on a page torn from the book, which somehow had escaped destruction. Dated five months before, it gave the position of the vessel and her bearings--she was then just outside Jupiter's orbit, Earthward bound--and concluded with a remark of sinister implications:

"Another man gone this morning. Simms, assistant technician. A fine workman. O'Deen swears he heard something moving on the deck. Cook thinks some of the doctor's stuffed monstrosities have come to life.
Ridiculous, of course. But what is one to think?"

Pondering the significance of those few lines, Thad climbed back to the deck. Was the ship haunted by some weird death, that had seized the crew man by man, mysteriously? That was the obvious implication. And if the flier had been still outside Jupiter's orbit when those words were written, it must have been weeks before the end. A lurking, invisible death! The scream he had heard....

* * * * *

He descended into the forecastle, and came upon another such silent record of frightful carnage as he had found in the captain's cabin. Dried blood, scraps of cloth, knives and other weapons. A fearful question was beginning to obsess him. What had become of the bodies of those who must have died in these conflicts? He dared not think the answer.

Gripping the welding arc, Thad approached the after hatch, giving to the cargo hold. Trepidation almost overpowered him, but he was determined to find the sinister menace of the ship, before it found him. The dog whimpered, hung back, and finally deserted him, contributing nothing to his peace of mind.

The hold proved to be dark. An indefinite black space, oppressive with the terrible silence of the flier. The air within it bore still more strongly the unpleasant fetor.

Thad hesitated on the steps. The hold was not inviting. But at the thought that he must sleep, unguarded, while taking the flier to Mars, his resolution returned. The uncertainty, the constant fear, would be unendurable.

He climbed on down, feeling for the light button. He found it, as his feet touched the floor. Blue light flooded the hold.

It was filled with monstrous things, colossal creatures, such as nothing that ever lived upon the Earth; like nothing known in the jungles of Venus or the deserts of Mars, or anything that has been found upon Jupiter's moons. They were monsters remotely resembling insects or crustaceans, but as large as horses or elephants; creatures upreared upon strange limbs, armed with hideously fanged jaws, cruel talons, frightful, saw-toothed snouts, and glittering scales, red and yellow and green. They leered at him with phosphorescent eyes, yellow and purple.

They cast grotesquely gigantic shadows in the blue light....

* * * * *

A cold shock of horror started along Thad's spine, at sight of those incredible nightmare things. Automatically be flung up the welding tool, flicking over the lever with his thumb, so that violet electric flame played about the electrode.

Then he saw that the crowding, hideous things were motionless, that they stood upon wooden pedestals, that many of them were supported upon metal bars. They were dead. Mounted. Collected specimens of some alien life.

Grinning wanly, and conscious of a weakness in the knees, he muttered: "They sure will fill the museum, if everybody gets the kick out of them that I did. A little too realistic, I'd say. Guess these are the 'stuffed monstrosities' mentioned in the page out of the log. No wonder the cook was afraid of them. Some of then do look hellishly alive!"

He started across the hold, shrinking involuntarily from the armored enormities that seemed crouched to spring at him, motionless eyes staring.

So, at the end of the long space, he found the treasure.
Glittering in the blue light, it looked unreal. Incredible. A dazzling dream. He stopped among the fearful things that seemed gathered as if to guard it, and stared with wide eyes through the opened face-plate of his helmet.

He saw neat stacks of gold ingots, new, freshly smelted; bars of silver-white iridium, of argent platinum, of blue-white osmium. Many of them. Thousands of pounds, Thad knew. He trembled at thought of their value. Almost beyond calculation.

Then he saw the coffer, lying beyond the piled, gleaming ingots--a huge box, eight feet long; made of some crystal that glittered with snowy whiteness, filled with sparkling, iridescent gleams, and inlaid with strange designs, apparently in vermilion enamel.

With a little cry, he ran toward the chest, moving awkwardly in the loose, deflated fabric of the Osprey suit.

* * * * *

Beside the coffer, on the floor of the hold, was literally a mountain of flame--blazing gems, heaped as if they had been carelessly dumped from it; cut diamonds, incredibly gigantic; monster emeralds, sapphires, rubies; and strange stones, that Thad did not recognize.

And Thad gasped with horror, when he looked at the designs of the vermilion inlay, in the white, gleaming crystal. Weird forms. Shapes of creatures somewhat like gigantic spiders, and more unlike them. Demonic things, wickedly fanged, jaws slavering. Executed with masterly skill, that made them seem living, menacing, secretly gloating!

Thad stared at them for long minutes, fascinated almost hypnotically. Three times he approached the chest, to lift the lid and find what it held. And three times the unutterable horror of those crimson images thrust him back,
shuddering.

"Nothing but pictures," he muttered hoarsely.

A fourth time he advanced, trembling, and seized the lid of the coffer. Heavy, massive, it was fashioned also of
glistening white crystal, and inlaid in crimson with weirdly hideous figures. Great hinges of white platinum held it
on the farther side; it was fastened with a simple, heavy hasp of the precious metal.

Hands quivering, Thad snapped back the hasp, lifted the lid.

New treasure in the chest would not have surprised him. He was prepared to meet dazzling wonders of gems or
priceless metal. Nor would he have been astonished at some weird creature such as one of those whose likenesses
were inlaid in the crystal.

But what he saw made him drop the massive lid.

A woman lay in the chest—motionless, in white.

* * * * *

In a moment he raised the lid again; examined the still form more closely. The woman had been young. The
features were regular, good to look upon. The eyes were closed; the white face appeared very peaceful.

Save for the extreme, cadaverous pallor, there was no mark of death. With a fancy that the body might be
miraculously living, sleeping, Thad thrust an arm out through the opened panel of his suit, and touched a slender,
bare white arm. It was stiff, very cold.

The still, pallid face was framed in fine brown hair. The fair, small hands were crossed upon the breast, over
the simple white garment.

A queer ache came into his heart. Something made him think of a white tower in the red hills near Helion, and
a girl waiting in its fragrant garden of saffron and purple—a girl like this.

The body lay upon a bed of blazing jewels.

It appeared, Thad thought, as if the pile of gems upon the floor had been hastily scraped from the coffer, to
make room for the quiet form. He wondered how long it had lain there. It looked as if it might have been living but
minutes before. Some preservative....

His thought was broken by a sound that rang from the open hatchway on the deck above—the furious barking
and yelping of the dog. Abruptly that was silent, and in its place came the uncanny and terrifying scream that Thad
had heard once before, on this flier of mystery. A shriek so keen and shrill that it seemed to tear out his nerves by
their roots. The voice of the haunter of the ship.

* * * * *

When Thad came back upon the deck, the dog was still barking nervously. He saw the animal forward, almost
at the bow. Hackles raised, tail between its legs, it was slinking backward, barking sharply as if to call for aid.

Apparently it was retreating from something between Thad and itself. But Thad, searching the dimly-lit deck,
could see no source of alarm. Nor could the structures upon it have shut any large object from his view.

"It's all right!" Thad called, intending to reassure the frightened animal, but finding his voice queerly dry.
"Coming on the double, old man. Don't worry."

The dog had reached the end of the deck. It stopped yelping, but snarled and whined as if in terror. It began
darting back and forth, moving exactly as if something were slowly closing in upon it, trapping it in the corner. But
Thad could see nothing.

Then it made a wild dash back toward Thad, darting along by the wall, as if trying to run past an unseen enemy.

Thad thought he heard quick, rasping footsteps, then, that were not those of the dog. And something seemed to
catch the dog in mid-air, as it leaped. It was hurled howling to the deck. For a moment it struggled furiously, as if an
invisible claw had pinned it down. Then it escaped, and fled whimpering to Thad's side.

He saw a new wound across its hips. Three long, parallel scratches, from which fresh red blood was trickling.

Regular scraping sounds came from the end of the deck, where no moving thing was to be seen—sounds such as
might be made by the walking of feet with unsheathed claws. Something was coming back toward Thad. Something
that was invisible!

* * * * *

Terror seized him, with the knowledge. He had nerved himself to face desperate men, or a savage animal. But
an invisible being, that could creep upon him and strike unseen! It was incredible ... yet he had seen the dog knocked
down, and the bleeding wound it had received.

His heart paused, then beat very quickly. For the moment he thought only blindly, of escape. He knew only an
overpowering desire to hide, to conceal himself from the invisible thing. Had it been possible, he might have tried to
leave the flier.

Beside him was one of the companionways amidships, giving access to a compartment of the vessel that he had
not explored. He turned, leaped down the steps, with the terrified dog at his heels.
Below, he found himself in a short hall, dimly lighted. Several metal doors opened from it. He tried one at random. It gave. He sprang through, let the dog follow, closed and locked it.

Trying to listen, he leaned weakly against the door. The rushing of his breath, swift and regular. The loud hammer of his thudding heart. The dog's low whines. Then--unmistakable scraping sounds, outside.

The scratching of claws, Thad knew. Invisible claws!

He stood there, bracing the door with the weight of his body, holding the welding arc ready in his hand. Several times the hinges creaked, and he felt a heavy pressure against the panels. But at last the scratching sounds ceased.

He relaxed. The monster had withdrawn, at least for a time.

When he had time to think, the invisibility of the thing was not so incredible. The mounted creatures he had seen in the hold were evidence that the flier had visited some unknown planet, where weird life reigned. It was not beyond reason that such a planet should be inhabited by beings invisible to human sight.

Human vision, as he knew, utilizes only a tiny fraction of the spectrum. The creature must be largely transparent to visible light, as human flesh is radiolucent to hard X-rays. Quite possibly it could be seen by infra-red or ultra-violet light--evidently it was visible enough to the dog's eyes, with their different range of sensitivity.

Pushing the subject from his mind, he turned to survey the room into which he had burst. It had apparently been occupied by a woman. A frail blue silk dress and more intimate items of feminine wearing apparel were hanging above the berth. Two pairs of delicate black slippers stood neatly below it.

Across from him was a dressing table, with a large mirror above it. Combs, pins, jars of cosmetic cluttered it. And Thad saw upon it a little leather-bound book, locked, stamped on the back "Diary."

He crossed the room and picked up the little book, which smelled faintly of jasmine. Momentary shame overcame him at thus stealing the secrets of an unknown girl. Necessity, however, left him no choice but to seize any chance of learning more of this ship of mystery and her invisible haunter. He broke the flimsy fastening.

Linda Cross was the name written on the fly-leaf, in a firm, clear feminine hand. On the next page was the photograph, in color, of a girl, the brown-haired girl whose body Thad had discovered in the crystal coffer in the hold. Her eyes, he saw, had been blue. He thought she looked very lovely--like the waiting girl in his old dream of the silver tower in the red hills by Helion.

The diary, it appeared, had not been kept very devotedly. Most of the pages were blank.

One of the first entries, dated a year and a half before, told of a party that Linda had attended in San Francisco, and of her refusal to dance with a certain man, referred to as "Benny," because he had been unpleasantly insistent about wanting to marry her. It ended:

"Dad said to-night that we're going off in the _Dragon_ again. All the way to Uranus, if the new fuel works as he expects. What a lark, to explore a few new worlds of our own! Dad says one of Uranus' moons is as large as Mercury. And Benny won't be proposing again soon!"

Turning on, Thad found other scattered entries, some of them dealing with the preparation for the voyage, the start from San Francisco--and a huge bunch of flowers from "Benny," the long months of the trip through space, out past the orbit of Mars, above the meteor belt, across Jupiter's orbit, beyond the track of Saturn, which was the farthest point that rocket explorers had previously reached, and on to Uranus, where they could not land because of the unstable surface.

The remainder of the entries Thad found less frequent, shorter, bearing the mark of excitement: landing upon Titania, the third and largest satellite of Uranus; unearthly forests, sheltering strange and monstrous life; the hunting of weird creatures, and mounting them for museum specimens.

Then the discovery of a ruined city, whose remains indicated that it had been built by a lost race of intelligent, spiderlike things; the finding of a temple whose walls were of precious metals, containing a crystal chest filled with wondrous gems; the smelting of the metal into convenient ingots, and the transfer of the treasure to the hold.

The first sinister note there entered the diary:

"Some of the men say we shouldn't have disturbed the temple. Think it will bring us bad luck. Rubbish, of course. But one man did vanish while they were smelting the gold. Poor Mr. Tom James. I suppose he ventured away from the rest, and something caught him."

The few entries that followed were shorter, and showed increasing nervous tension. They recorded the departure from Titania, made almost as soon as the treasure was loaded. The last was made several weeks later. A dozen men had vanished from the crew, leaving only gouts of blood to hint the manner of their going. The last entry ran:

"Dad says I'm to stay in here to-day. Old dear, he's afraid the thing will get me--whatever it is. It's really serious. Two men taken from their berths last night. And not a trace. Some of them think it's a curse on the treasure."
One of them swears he saw Dad's stuffed specimens moving about in the hold.

"Some terrible thing must have slipped aboard the flier, out of the jungle. That's what Dad and the captain think. Queer they can't find it. They've searched all over. Well...."

Musing and regretful, Thad turned back for another look at the smiling girl in the photograph.

What a tragedy her death had been! Reading the diary had made him like her. Her balance and humor. Her quiet affection for "Dad." The calm courage with which she seemed to have faced the creeping, lurking death that darkened the ship with its unescapable shadow.

How had her body come to be in the coffer, he wondered, when all the others were--gone? It had shown no marks of violence. She must have died of fear. No, her face had seemed too calm and peaceful for that. Had she chosen easy death by some poison, rather than that other dreadful fate? Had her body been put in the chest to protect it, and the poison arrested decomposition?

Thad was still studying the picture, thoughtfully and sadly, when the dog, which had been silent, suddenly growled again, and retreated from the door, toward the corner of the room.

The invisible monster had returned. Thad heard its claws scratching across the door again. And he heard another dreadful sound—not the long, shrill scream that had so grated on his nerves before, but a short, sharp coughing or barking, a series of shrill, indescribable notes that could have been made by no beast he knew.

* * * * *

The decision to open the door cost a huge effort of Thad's will.

For hours he had waited, thinking desperately. And the thing outside the door had waited as patiently, scratching upon it from time to time, uttering those dreadful, shrill coughing cries.

Sooner or later, he would have to face the monster. Even if he could escape from the room and avoid it for a time, he would have to meet it in the end. And it might creep upon him while he slept.

To be sure, the issue of the combat was extremely doubtful. The monster, apparently, had succeeded in killing every man upon the flier, even though some of them had been armed. It must be large and very ferocious.

But Thad was not without hope. He still wore his Osprey-suit. The heavy fabric, made of metal wires impregnated with a tough, elastic composition, should afford considerable protection against the thing.

The welding arc, intended to fuse refractive meteoric iron, would be no mean weapon, at close quarters. And the quarters would be close.

If only he could find some way to make the thing visible!

Paint, or something of the kind, would stick to its skin.... His eyes, searching the room, caught the jar of face powder on the dressing table. Dash that over it! It ought to stick enough to make the outline visible.

So, at last, holding the powder ready in one hand, he waited until a time when the pressure upon the door had just relaxed, and he knew the monster was waiting outside. Swiftly, he opened the door....

* * * * *

Thad had partially overcome the instinctive horror that the unseen being had first aroused in him. But it returned in a sickening wave when he heard the short, shrill, coughing cries, hideously eager, that greeted the opening of the door. And the quick rasping of naked claws upon the floor. _Sounds from nothingness!_

He flung the powder at the sound.

A form of weird horror materialized before him, still half invisible, half outlined with the white film of adhering powder: gigantic and hideous claws, that seemed to reach out of empty air, the side of a huge, scaly body, a yawning, dripping jaw. For a moment Thad could see great, hooked fangs in that jaw. Then they vanished, as if an unseen tongue had licked the powder from them, dissolving it in fluids which made it invisible.

That unearthly, half-seen shape leaped at him.

He was carried backward into the room, hurled to the floor. Claws were rasping upon the tough fabric of his suit. His arm was seized crushingly in half-visible jaws.

* * * * *

Desperately he clung to the welding tool. The heated electrode was driven toward his body. He fought to keep it away; he knew that it would burn through even the insulated fabric of his suit.

A claw ripped savagely at his side. He heard the sharp, rending sound, as the tough fabric of his suit was torn, and felt a thin pencil of pain drawn along his body, where a claw cut his skin.

Suddenly the suit was full of the earthy fetor of the monster's body, nauseatingly intense. Thad gasped, tried to hold his breath, and thrust upward hard with the incandescent electrode. He felt warm blood trickling from the wound.

A numbing blow struck his arm. The welding tool was carried from his hand. Flung to the side of the room, it clattered to the floor; and then a heavy weight came upon his chest, forcing the breath from his lungs. The monster stood upon his body and clawed at him.
Thad squirmed furiously. He kicked out with his feet, encountering a great, hard body. Futility he beat and thrust with his arms against the pillarlike limb.

His body was being mauled, bruised beneath the thick fabric. He heard it tear again, along his right thigh. But he felt no pain, and thought the claws had not reached the skin.

It was the yellow dog that gave him the chance to recover the weapon. The animal had been running back and forth in the opposite end of the room, fairly howling in excitement and terror. Now, with the mad courage of desperation, it leaped recklessly at the monster.

A mighty, dimly seen claw caught it, hurled it back across the room. It lay still, broken, whimpering.

For a moment the thing had lifted its weight from Thad's body. And Thad slipped quickly from beneath it, flung himself across the room, snatched up the welding tool.

In an instant the creature was upon him again. But he met it with the incandescent electrode. He was crouched in a corner, now, where it could come at him from only one direction. Its claws still slashed at him ferociously. But he was able to cling to the weapon, and meet each onslaught with hot metal.

Gradually its mad attacks weakened. Then one of his blind, thrusting blows seemed to burn into a vital organ. A terrible choking, strangling sound came from the air. And he heard the thrashing struggles of wild convulsions. At last all was quiet. He prodded the thing again and again with the hot electrode, and it did not move. It was dead.

The creature's body was so heavy that Thad had to return to the bridge, and shut off the current in the gravity plates along the keel, before he could move it. He dragged it to the lock through which he had entered the flier, and consigned it to space....

* * * * *

Five days later Thad brought the _Red Dragon_ into the atmosphere of Mars. A puzzled pilot came aboard, in response to his signals, and docked the flier safely at Helion. Thad went down into the hold again, with the astonished port authorities who had come aboard to inspect the vessel.

Again he passed among the grotesque and outrageous monsters in the hold, leading the gasping officers. While they marveled at the treasure, he lifted the weirdly embellished lid of the coffer of white crystal, and looked once more upon the still form of the girl within it.

Pity stirred him. An ache came in his throat.

Linda Cross, so quiet and cold and white, and yet so lovely. How terrible her last days of life must have been, with doom shadowing the vessel, and the men vanishing mysteriously, one by one! Terrible--until she had sought the security of death.

Strangely, Thad felt no great elation at the thought that half the incalculable treasure about him was now safely his own, as the award of salvage. If only the girl were still living.... He felt a poignantly keen desire to hear her voice.

Thad found the note when they started to lift her from the chest. A hasty scrawl, it lay beneath her head, among glittering gems.

"This woman is not dead. Please have her given skilled medical attention as soon as possible. She lies in a state of suspended animation, induced by the injection of fifty minims of zeronel."

"She is my daughter, Linda Cross, and my sole heir."

"I entreat the finders of this to have care given her, and to keep in trust for her such part of the treasure on this ship as may remain after the payment of salvage or other claims."

"Sometime she will wake. Perhaps in a year, perhaps in a hundred. The purity of my drugs is uncertain, and the injection was made hastily, so I do not know the exact time that must elapse."

"If this is found, it will be because the lurking thing upon the ship has destroyed me and all my men."

"Please do not fail me."

Levington Cross."

Thad bought the white tower of his dreams, slim and graceful in its Martian garden of saffron and purple, among the low ocher hills beside Helion. He carried the sleeping girl through the silver door where the girl of his dreams had waited, and set the coffer in a great, vaulted chamber. Many times each day he came into the room where she lay, to look into her pallid face, and feel her cold wrist. He kept a nurse in attendance, and had a physician call daily.

A long Martian year went by.

* * * * *

Looking in his mirror one day, Thad saw little wrinkles about his eyes. He realized that the nervous strain and anxiety of waiting was aging him. And it might be a hundred years, he remembered, before Linda Cross came from beneath the drug's influence.

He wondered if he should grow old and infirm, while Linda lay still young and beautiful and unchanged in her
sleep; if she might awake, after long years, and see in him only a feeble old man. And he knew that he would not be sorry he had waited, even if he should die before she revived.

On the next day, the nurse called him into the room where Linda lay. He was bending over her when she opened her eyes. They were blue, glorious.

A long time she looked up at him, first in fearful wonder, then with confidence, and dawning understanding. And at last she smiled.

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SECURITY
By Poul Anderson

In a world where Security is all-important, nothing can ever be secure. A mountain-climbing vacation may wind up in deep Space. Or loyalty may prove to be high treason. But it has its rewards.

It had been a tough day at the lab, one of those days when nothing seems able to go right. And, of course, it had been precisely the day Hammond, the Efficiency inspector, would choose to stick his nose in. Another mark in his little notebook—and enough marks like that meant a derating, and Control had a habit of sending derated labmen to Venus. That wasn't a criminal punishment, but it amounted to the same thing. Allen Lancaster had no fear of it for himself; the sector chief of a Project was under direct Control jurisdiction rather than Efficiency, and Control was friendly to him. But he'd hate to see young Rogers get it—the boy had been married only a week now.

To top the day off, a report had come to Lancaster's desk from Sector Seven of the Project. Security had finally cleared it for general transmission to sector chiefs—and it was the complete design of an electronic valve on which some of the best men in Lancaster's own division, Sector Thirteen, had been sweating for six months. There went half a year's work down the drain, all for nothing, and Lancaster would have that much less to show at the next Project reckoning.

He had cursed for several minutes straight, drawing the admiring glances of his assistants. It was safe enough for a high-ranking labman to gripe about Security—in fact, it was more or less expected. Scientists had their privileges.

One of these was a private three-room apartment. Another was an extra liquor ration. Tonight, as he came home, Lancaster decided to make a dent in the latter. He'd eaten at the commissary, as usual, but hadn't stayed to talk. All the way home in the tube, he'd been thinking of that whiskey and soda.

Now it sparkled gently in his glass and he sighed, letting a smile crease his lean homely face. He was a tall man, a little stooped, his clothes—uniform and mufti alike—perpetually rumpled. Solitary by nature, he was still unmarried in spite of the bachelor tax and had only one son. The boy was ten years old now, must be in the Youth Guard; Lancaster wasn't sure, never having seen him.

It was dark outside his windows, but a glow above the walls across the skyway told of the city pulsing and murmuring beyond. He liked the quiet of his evenings alone and had withstood a good deal of personal and official pressure to serve in various patriotic organizations. "Damn it," he had explained, "I'm not doing routine work. I'm on a Project, and I need relaxation of my own choosing."

He selected a tape from his library. Eine Kleine Nachtmusik lilted joyously about him as he found a chair and sat down. Control hadn't gotten around to making approved lists of music yet, though you'd surely never hear Mozart in a public place. Lancaster got a cigar from the humidor and collapsed his long gaunt body across chair and hassock. Smoke, whiskey, good music—they washed his mind clean of worry and frustration; he drifted off in a mist of unformed dreams. Yes, it wasn't such a bad world.

The mail-tube went ping! and he opened his eyes, swearing. For a moment he was tempted to let the pneumo-roll lie where it fell, but habit was too strong. He grumbled his way over to the basket and took it out.

The stamp across it jerked his mind to wakefulness. OfiSal, sEkret, fOr adresE OnlE—and a Security seal!

After a moment he swallowed his thumping heart. It couldn't be serious, not as far as he personally was concerned anyway. If that had been the case, a squad of monitors would have been at the door. Not this message tube.... He broke the seal and unfolded the flimsy with elaborate care. Slowly, he scanned it. Underneath the official letterhead, the words were curt. "Dis iz A matr uv urjensE and iz top sEkret. destrY Dis letr and Du tUb kontAnIn it. tUmOrO, 15 jUn, at 2130 ourz, U wil gO tU Du obzurvatOrE, A nIt klub at 5730 viktOrE strEt, and ask Du hedwAtr fOr A mistr Berg. U wil asUm Dat hE iz an Old frend uv yOrz and Dat Dis iz A sOSal EveniN. Du UZUal penaltEz ar invOkt fOr fAlUr tU komplII."
There was no signature. Lancaster stood for a moment, trying to imagine what this might be. There was a brief chill of sweat on his skin. Then he suppressed his emotions. He had nothing to fear. His record was clean and he wasn't being arrested.

His mind wandered rebelliously off on something that had occurred to him before. Admittedly the new phonetic orthography was more efficient than the old, if less esthetic; but since little of the earlier literature was being re-issued in modern spelling too many books had actually been condemned as subversive—only a few works on history, politics, philosophy, and the like, together with some scientific texts restricted for security reasons; but one by one, the great old writings were sent to forgetfulness.

Well, these were critical times. There wasn't material and energy to spare for irrelevant details. No doubt when complete peace was achieved there would be a renaissance. Meanwhile he, Lancaster, had his Euripides and Goethe and whatever else he liked, or knew where to borrow it.

As for this message, they must want him for something big, maybe something really interesting.

Nevertheless, his evening was ruined.

The Observatory was like most approved recreation spots—large and raucous, selling unrationed food and drink and amusement at uncontrolled prices of which the government took its usual lion's share. The angle in this place was astronomy. The ceiling was a blue haze a-glitter with slowly wheeling constellations, and the strippers began with make-believe spacesuits. There were some rather good murals on the walls depicting various stages of the conquest of space. Lancaster was amused at one of them. When he'd been here three years ago, the first landing on Ganymede had shown a group of men unfurling a German flag. It had stuck in his mind, because he happened to know that the first expedition there had actually been Russian. That was all right then, seeing that Germany was an ally at the time. But now that Europe was growing increasingly cold to the idea of an American-dominated world, the Ganymedean pioneers were holding a good safe Stars and Stripes.

Oh, well. You had to keep the masses happy. They couldn't see that their sacrifices and the occasional short wars were necessary to prevent another real smashup like the one seventy-five years ago. Lancaster's annoyance was directed at the sullen foreign powers and the traitors within his own land. It was because of them that science had to be strait-jacketed by Security regulations.


"Yes, sir. This way, please."

Lancaster slouched after him. He'd worn the dress uniform of a Project officer, but he felt that all eyes were on its deplorable sloppiness. The headwaiter conducted him between tables of half-crocked customers—burly black-uniformed Space Guardsmen, army and air officers, richly clad industrialists and union bosses, civilian leaders, their wives and mistresses. The waiters were all Martian slaves, he noticed, their phosphorescent owl-eyes smoldering in the dim blue light.

He was ushered into a curtained booth. There was an auto-dispenser so that those using it need not be interrupted by servants, and an ultrasonic globe on the table was already vibrating to soundproof the region. Lancaster's gaze went to the man sitting there. In spite of being short, he was broad-shouldered and compact in plain gray evening pajamas. His face was round and freckled, almost cherubic, under a shock of sandy hair, but there were merry little devils in his eyes.

"Good evening, Dr. Lancaster," he said. "Please sit down. What'll you have?"

"Thanks, I'll have Scotch and soda." Might as well make this expensive, if the government was footing the bill. And if this—Berg—thought him un-American for drinking an imported beverage, what of it? The scientist lowered himself into the seat opposite his host.

"I'm having the same, as a matter of fact," said Berg mildly. He twirled the dial and slipped a couple of five-dollar coins into the dispenser slot. When the tray was ejected, he sipped his drink appreciatively and looked across the rim of the glass at the other man.

"You're a high-ranking physicist on the Arizona Project, aren't you, Dr. Lancaster?" he asked.

That much was safe to admit. Lancaster nodded.

"What is your work, precisely?"

"You know I can't tell you anything like that."

"It's all right. Here are my credentials." Berg extended a wallet. Lancaster scanned the cards and handed them back.

"Okay, so you're in Security," he said. "I still can't tell you anything, not without proper clearance."

Berg chuckled amiably. "Good. I'm glad to see you're discreet. Too many labmen don't understand the necessity of secrecy, even between different branches of the same organization." With a sudden whip-like sharpness: "You didn't tell anyone about this meeting, did you?"

"No, of course not." Despite himself, Lancaster was rattled. "That is, a friend asked if I'd care to go out with her
tonight, but I said I was meeting someone else."

"That's right." Berg relaxed, smiling. "All right, we may as well get down to business. You're getting quite an honor, Dr. Lancaster. You've been tapped for one of the most important jobs in the Solar System."

"Eh?" Lancaster's eyes widened behind the contact lenses. "But no one else has informed me—"

"No one of your acquaintance knows of this. Nor shall they. But tell me, you've done work on dielectrics, haven't you?"

"Yes. It's been a sort of specialty of mine, in fact. I wrote my thesis on the theory of dielectric polarization and since then—no, that's classified."

"M-hm." Berg took another sip of his drink. "And right now you're just a cog in a computer-development Project. You see, I do know a few things about you. However, we've decided—higher up, you know, in fact on the very top level—to take you off it for the time being and put you on this other job, one concerning your specialty. Furthermore, you won't be part of a great organizational machine, but very much on your own. The fewer who know of this, the better."

Lancaster wasn't sure he liked that. Once the job was done—if he were possessed of all information on it—he might be incarcerated or even shot as a Security risk. Things like that had happened. But there wasn't much he could do about it.

"Have no fears," Berg seemed to read his thoughts. "Your reward may be a little delayed for Security reasons, but it will come in due time." He leaned forward, earnestly. "I repeat, this project is top secret. It's a vital link in something much bigger than you can imagine, and few men below the President even know of it. Therefore, the very fact that you've worked on it—that you've done any outside work at all—must remain unknown, even to the chiefs of your Project."

"Good stunt if you can do it," shrugged Lancaster. "But I'm hot. Security keeps tabs on everything I do."

"This is how we'll work it. You have a furlough coming up in two weeks, don't you—a three months' furlough? Where were you going?"

"I thought I'd visit the Southwest. Get in some mountain climbing, see the canyons and Indian ruins and—"

"Yes, yes. Very well. You'll get your ticket as usual and a reservation at the Tycho Hotel in Phoenix. You'll go there and, on your first evening, retire early. Alone, I need hardly add. We'll be waiting for you in your room. There'll be a very carefully prepared duplicate—surgical disguise, plastic fingerprinting tips, fully educated in your habits, tastes, and mannerisms. He'll stay behind and carry out your vacation while we smuggle you away. A similar exchange will be affected when you return, you'll be told exactly how your double spent the summer, and you'll resume your ordinary life."

"Ummm—well—" It was too sudden. Lancaster had to hedge. "But look—I'll be supposedly coming back from an outdoor vacation, with a suntan and well rested. Somebody's going to get suspicious."

"There'll be sun lamps where you're going, my friend. And I think the chance to work independently on something that really interests you will prove every bit as restful to your nerves as a summer's travel. I know the scientific mentality." Berg chuckled. "Yes, indeed."

The exchange went off so smoothly that it was robbed of all melodrama, though Lancaster had an unexpectedly eerie moment when he confronted his double. It was his own face that looked at him, there in the impersonal hotel room, himself framed against blowing curtains and darkness of night. Then Berg gestured him to follow and they went down a cord ladder hanging from the window sill. A car waited in the alley below and slid into easy motion the instant they had gotten inside.

There was a driver and another man in the front seat, both shadows against the moving blur of street lamps and night. Berg and Lancaster sat in the rear, and the secret agent chatted all the way. But he said nothing of informational content.

When the highway had taken them well into the loneliness of the desert, the car turned off it, bumped along a miserable dirt track until it had crossed a ridge, and slowed before a giant transcontinental dieselectric truck. A man emerged from its cab, waving an unhurried arm, and the car swung around to the rear of the van. There was a tailgate lowered, forming a ramp; above it, the huge double doors opened on a cavern of blackness. The car slid up the ramp, and the man outside pushed it in after them and closed the doors. Presently the truck got into motion.

"This is really secret!" whistled Lancaster. He felt awed and helpless.

"Quite so. Security doesn't like the government's right hand to know what its left is doing." Berg smiled, a dim flash of teeth in his shadowy face. Then he was serious. "It's necessary, Lancaster. You don't know how strong and well-organized the subversives are."

"They—" The physicist closed his mouth. It was true—he hadn't the faintest notion, really. He followed the news, but in a cursory fashion, without troubling to analyze the meaning of it. Damn it all, he had enough else to think about. Just as well that elections had been suspended and bade fair to continue indefinitely in abeyance. If he, a
member of the intelligentsia, wasn't sufficiently acquainted with the political and military facts of life to make rational decisions, it certainly behooved the ill-educated masses to obey.

"We might as well stretch ourselves," said the driver. "Long way to go yet." He climbed out and switched on an overhead light.

The interior of the van was roomy, even allowing for the car. There were bunks, a table and chairs, a small refrigerator and cookstove. The driver, a lean saturnine man who seemed to be forever chewing gum, began to prepare coffee. The other sat down, whistling tunelessly. He was young and powerfully built, but his right arm ended in a prosthetic claw. All of them were dressed in inconspicuous civilian garb.

"Take us about ten hours, maybe," said Berg. "The spaceship's 'way over in Colorado."

He caught Lancaster's blank stare, and grinned. "Yes, my friend, your lab is out in space. Surprised?"

"Mmm—yeah. I've never been off Earth."

"Sokay. We run at acceleration, you won't be spacesick." Berg drew up a chair, sat down, and tilted it back against a wall. The steady rumble of engines pulsed under his words:

"It's interesting, really, to consider the relationship between government and military technology. The powerful, authoritarian governments have always arisen in such times as the evolution of warfare made a successful fighting machine something elaborate, expensive, and maintainable by professionals only. Like in the Roman Empire. It took years to train a legionnaire and a lot of money to equip an army and keep it in the field. So Rome became autarchic. However, it was not so expensive a proposition that a rebellious general couldn't put some troops up for a while—or he could pay them with plunder. So you did get civil wars. Later, when the Empire had broken up and warfare relied largely on the individual barbarian who brought his own weapons with him, government loosened. It had to—any ruler who got to throwing his weight around too much would have insurrection on his hands. Then as war again became an art—well, you see how it goes. There are other factors, of course, like religion—ideology in general. But by and large, it's worked out the way I explained it. Because there are always people willing to fight when government encroaches on what they consider their liberties, and governments are always going to try to encroach. So the balance struck depends on comparative strength. The American colonists back in 1776 relied on citizen levies and weapons were so cheap and simple that almost anyone could obtain them. Therefore government stayed loose for a long time. But nowadays, who except a government can make atomic bombs and space rockets? So we get absolute states."

Lancaster looked around, feeling the loneliness close in on him. The driver was still clattering the coffee pot. The one-armed man was utterly blank and expressionless. And Berg sat there, smiling, pouring out those damnable cynicisms. Was it some kind of test? Were they probing his loyalty? What kind of reply was expected?

"We're a democratic nation and you know it," he said. It came out more feebly than he had thought.

"Oh, well, sure. This is just a state of emergency which has lasted unusually long, seventy-two years to be exact. If we hadn't lost World War III, and needed a powerful remilitarization to overthrow the Soviet world—but we did." Berg took out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke? I was just trying to explain to you why the subversives are so dangerous. They have to be, or they wouldn't stand any kind of chance. When you set out to upset something as big as the United States government, it's an all or nothing proposition. They've had a long time now to organize, and there's a huge percentage of malcontents to help them out."

"Malcontents? Well, look, Berg—I mean, you're the expert and of course you know your business, but a natural human grumble at conditions doesn't mean revolutionary sentiments. These aren't such bad times. People have work, and their needs are supplied. They aren't hankering to have the Hemispheric Wars back again."

"The standard revolutionary argument," said Berg patiently, "is that the rebels aren't trying to overthrow the nation at all, but simply to restore constitutional and libertarian government. It's common knowledge that they have help and some subsidies from outside, but it's contended that these are merely countries tired of a world dominated by an American dictatorship and, being small Latin-American and European states, couldn't possibly think of conquering us. Surely you've seen subversive literature."

"Well, yes. Can't help finding their pamphlets. All over the place. And—" Lancaster closed his mouth. No, damned if he was going to admit that he knew three co-workers who listened to rebel propaganda broadcasts. Those were silly, harmless kids—why get them in trouble, maybe get them sent to camp?

"You probably don't appreciate the hold that kind of argument has on all too many intellectuals—and a lot of the common herd, too," said Berg. "Naturally you wouldn't—if your attitude has always been unsympathetic, these people aren't going to confide their thoughts to you. And then there are bought men, and spies smuggled in, and—oh, I needn't elaborate. It's enough to say that we've been thoroughly infiltrated, and that most of their agents have absolutely impeccable dossiers. We can't give neoscop to everybody, you know—Security has to rely on spot checks and the testing of key personnel. Only when organizations get as big as they are today, there's apt to be no real key man, and a few spies strategically placed in the lower echelons can pick-up a hell of a lot of information. Then there
are the colonists out on the planets—our hold on them has always necessarily been loose, because of transportation and communication difficulties if nothing else. And, as I say, foreign powers. A little country like Switzerland or Denmark or Venezuela can't do much by itself, but an undercover international pooling of resources.... Anyway, we have reason to believe in the existence of a large, well financed, well organized underground, with trained fighting men, big secret weapons dumps, and saboteurs ready for the word 'go'—to say nothing of a restless population and any number of covert sympathizers who'd follow if the initial uprising had good results."

"Or bad, depending on whose viewpoint you take," grinned the one-armed man.

Lancaster put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on shaking hands. "What has all this got to do with me?" he protested. "I'm not the hero of some cloak-and-dagger spy story. I'm no good at undercover stuff—what do you want of me?"

"It's very simple," Berg replied quietly. "The balance of power is still with the government, because it does have more of the really heavy weapons than any other group can possibly muster. Alphabet bombs, artillery, rockets, armor, spaceships and space missiles. You see? Only research has lately suggested that a new era in warfare is developing—a new weapon as decisive as the Macedonian phalanx, gunpowder, and aircraft were in their day." As Lancaster raised his eyes, he met an almost febrile glitter in Berg's gaze. "And this weapon may reverse the trend. It may be the cheap and simple arm that anyone can make and use—the equalizer! So we've got to develop it before the rebels do. They have laboratories of their own, and their skill at stealing our secrets makes it impossible for us to trust the research to a Project in the usual manner. The fewer who knew of this weapon, the better—because in the wrong hands it could mean—Armageddon!"

The run from Earth was short, for the space laboratory wasn't far away at the moment as interplanetary distances go. Lancaster wasn't told anything about its orbit, but guessed that it had a path a million miles or so sunward from Earth and highly tilted with respect to the ecliptic. That made for almost perfect concealment, for what spacecraft would normally go much north or south of the region containing the planets?

He was too preoccupied during the journey to estimate orbital figures, anyway. He had seen enough pictures of open space, and some of them had been excellent. But the reality towered unbelievably over all representations. There simply is no way of describing that naked grandeur, and when you have once experienced it you don't want to try. His companions—Berg and the one-armed Jessup, who piloted the spaceboat—respected his need for silence.

The station had been painted non-reflecting black, which complicated temperature control but made accidental observation of its existence almost impossible. It loomed against the cold glory of stars like a pit of ultimate darkness, and Jessup had to guide the boat in with radar. When the last lock had clanged shut behind him and he stood in a narrow metal corridor, shut away from the sky, Lancaster felt a sense of unendurable loss.

It faded, and he grew aware of others watching him. There were half a dozen people, a motley group dressed in any shabby garment they happened to fancy, with no sign of the semi-military discipline of a Project crew. A Martian hovered in the background, and Lancaster didn't notice him at first. Berg introduced the humans casually.

There was a stocky gray-haired man named Friedrichs, a lanky space-tanned young chap called Isaacson, a middle-aged woman and her husband by the name of Dufrere, a quiet Oriental who answered to Hwang, and a red-haired woman presented as Karen Marek. These, Berg explained, were the technicians who would be helping Lancaster. This end of the space station was devoted to the labs and factories; for security reasons, Lancaster couldn't be permitted to go elsewhere, but it was hoped he would be comfortable here.

"Ummm—pardon me, aren't you a rather mixed group?" asked the physicist.

"Yes, very," said Berg cheerfully. "The Dufreres are French, Hwang is Chinese, and Karen here is Norwegian though her husband was Czech. Not to mention.... There you are, I didn't see you before! Dr. Lancaster, I'd like you to meet Rakkan of Thyle, Mars, a very accomplished labman."

Lancaster gulped, shifting his feet and looking awkwardly at the small gray-feathered body and the beaked owl-face. Rakkan bowed politely, sparing Lancaster the decision of whether or not to shake the clawlike hand. He assumed Rakkan was somebody's slave—but since when did slaves act as social equals?

"But you said this project was top secret!" he blurted.

"Oh, it is," smiled Karen Marek. She had a husky, pleasant voice, and while she was a little too thin to be really good-looking, she was cast in a fine mold and her eyes were large and gray and lovely. "I assure you, non-Americans are perfectly capable of preserving a secret. More so than most Americans, really—we don't have ties on Earth. No one to blab to."

"It's not well known today, but the original Manhattan Project that constructed the first atomic bombs had quite an international character," said Berg. "It even included German, Italian, and Hungarian elements though the United States was at war with those countries."

"Come along and we'll get you settled in your quarters," invited Isaacson.

Lancaster followed him down the long hallways, rather dazed with the whole business. He noticed that the
space station had a crude, unfinished look, as if it had been hastily thrown together from whatever materials were available. That didn't ring true for a government enterprise, no matter how secret.

Berg seemed to read his thought again. "We've worked under severe handicaps," he said. "Look, just suppose a lot of valuable material and equipment were ferried into space. If it's an ordinary government deal, you know how many light-years of red tape are involved. Requisitions have to be filled out in triplicate, every last rivet has to be accounted for—there'd simply have been too much chance of a rebel spy getting a lead on us. It was safer all around to use whatever chance materials could be obtained from salvage or through individual purchases on other planets. Ever hear of the Waikiki?"

"Ummm—seems so—wasn't she the big freighter that disappeared many years ago?"

"That's the one. A meteor swarm struck her on the way to Venus. Furthermore, one of them shorted out her engine controls, so that she swooped out of the ecliptic plane and fell into an eccentric skew orbit. When this project was first started, one of our astronomers thought he'd identified the swarm—it has a regular path of its own about the sun, though the orbit is so cockeyed that spaceships hardly ever even see the things. Anyway, knowing the orbit of the meteors and that of the Waikiki at the time, he could calculate where the disaster must have taken place—which gave us a lead in searching for the hulk. We found it after a lot of investigation, moved it here, and built the station up around it. Very handy. And completely secret."

Lancaster had always suspected that Security was a little mad. Now he knew it. Oh, well—

His room was small and austere, but privacy was nice. The lab crew ate in a common refectory. Beyond the edge of their territory, great bulkheads blocked off three-fourths of the space station. Lancaster was sure that many people and several Martians lived there, for in the days that followed he saw any number of strangers appearing and disappearing in the region allowed him. Most of these were workmen of some kind or other, called in to help the lab crew as needed, but all of them were tight-lipped. They must have been cautioned not to speak to the guest more than was strictly necessary.

Living was Spartan in the station. It rotated fast enough to give weight, but even on the outer skin that was only one-half Earth gravity. A couple of silent Martians prepared undistinguished meals and did housework in the quarters. There were no films or other organized recreation, though Lancaster was told that the forbidden sector included a good-sized room for athletics.

But the crew he worked with didn't seem to mind. They had their own large collections of books and music wires, which they borrowed from each other. They played chess and poker with savage skill. Conversation was, at first, somewhat restrained in Lancaster's presence, and most of the humor had so little reference to things he knew that he couldn't follow it, but he became aware that they talked with more animation and intelligence than his friends on Earth. Manners were utterly informal, and it wasn't long before even Lancaster was being addressed by his first name; but cooperation was smooth and there seemed to be none of the intrigue and backbiting of a typical Project crew.

And the work filled their lives. Lancaster was caught up in it the "day" after his arrival, realized at once what it meant, and was plunged into the fascination of it. Berg hadn't lied; this was big!

The perfect dielectric.

Such, at least, was the aim of the project. It was explained to Lancaster that one Dr. Sophoulis had first seen the possibilities and organized the research. It had gone ahead slowly, hampered by a lack of needed materials and expert personnel. When Sophoulis died, none of his assistants felt capable of carrying on the work at any decent rate of speed. They were all competent in their various specialties, but it takes more than training to do basic research—a certain inborn, intuitive flair is needed. So they had sent to Earth for a new boss—Lancaster.

The physicist scratched his head in puzzlement. It didn't seem right that something so important should have to take the leavings of technical personnel. Secrecy or not, the most competent men on Earth should have been tapped for this job, and they should have been given everything they needed to carry it through. Then he forgot his bewilderment in the clean chill ecstasy of the work.

Man had been hunting superior dielectrics for a long time now. It was more than a question of finding the perfect electrical insulator, though that would be handy too. What was really important was the sort of condensers made possible by a genuinely good dielectric material. Given that, you could do fantastic things in electronics. Most significant of all was the matter of energy storage. If you could store large amounts of electricity in an accumulator of small volume, without appreciable leakage loss, you could build generators designed to handle average rather than peak load—with resultant savings in cost; you could build electric motors, containing their own energy supply and hence portable—which meant electric automobiles and possibly aircraft; you could use inconveniently located power sources, such as remote waterfalls, or dilute sources like sunlight, to augment—maybe eventually replace—the waning reserves of fuel and fissionable minerals; you could.... Lancaster's mind gave up on all the possibilities opening before him and settled down to the immediate task at hand.
"The original mineral was found on Venus, in the Gorbu-vashtar country," explained Karen Marek. "Here's a sample." She gave him a lump of rough, dense material which glittered in hard rainbow points of light. "It was just a curiosity at first, till somebody thought to test its electrical properties. Those were slightly fantastic. We have all chemical and physical data on this stuff already, of course, as well as an excellent idea of its crystal structure. It's a funny mixture of barium and titanium compounds with some rare earths and—well, read the report for yourself."

Lancaster's eyes skimmed down the sheaf of papers she handed him. "Can't make very good condensers out of this," he objected. "Too brittle—and look how the properties vary with temperature. A practical dielectric has to be stable in every way, at least over the range of conditions you intend to use it in."

She nodded. "Of course. Anyway, the mineral is very rare on Venus, and you know how tough it is to search for anything in Gorbu-vashtar. What's important is the lead it gave Sophoulis. You see, the dielectric constant of this material isn't constant at all. It increases with applied voltage. Look at this curve here."

Lancaster whistled. "What the devil—but that's impossible! That much variability means a crystal structure which is—uh—flexible, damn it! But you've got a brittle substance here—"

According to the accepted theory of dielectricity, this couldn't be. Lancaster realized with a thumping behind his veins that the theory would have to be modified. Rather, this was an altogether different phenomenon from normal insulation.

He supposed some geological freak had formed the mineral. Venus was a strange planet anyway. But that didn't matter. The important thing was to get to know this process. He went off into a happy mist of quantum mechanics, oscillation theory, and periodic functions of a complex variable.

Karen and Isaacson exchanged a slow smile.

Sophoulis and his people had done heroic work under adverse conditions. A tentative theory of the mechanism involved had already been formulated, and the search had started for a means to duplicate the super-dielectricity in materials otherwise more suitable to man's needs. But as he grew familiar with the place and the job, Lancaster wondered just how adverse the conditions really were.

True, the equipment was old and cranky, much of it haywired together, much of it invented from scratch. But Rakkan the Martian, for all his lack of formal education, was unbelievably clever where it came to making apparatus and making it behave, and Friedrichs was a top-flight designer. The lab had what it needed—wasn't that enough?

The rest of Lancaster's crew were equally good. The Dufreses were physical chemists par excellence, Isaacson a brilliant crystallographer with an unusual brain for mathematics, Hwang an expert on quantum theory and inter-atomic forces, Karen an imaginative experimenter. None of them quite had the synthesizing mentality needed for an overall picture and a fore-vision of the general direction of work—that had been Sophoulis' share, and was now Lancaster's—but they were all cheerful and skilled where it came to detail work and could often make suggestions in a theoretical line.

Then, too, there was no Security snooping about, no petty scramble for recognition and promotion, no red tape. What was more important, Lancaster began to realize, was the personal nature of the whole affair. In a Project, the overall chief set the pattern, and it was followed by his subordinates with increasingly less latitude as you worked down through the lower ranks. You did what you were told, produced results or else, and kept your mouth shut outside your own sector of the Project. You had only the vaguest idea of what actually was being created, and why, and how it fitted into the broad scheme of society.

Hwang and Rakkan commented on that, one "evening" at dinner when they had grown more relaxed in Lancaster's presence. "It was inevitable, I suppose, that scientific research should become corporate," said the Chinese. "So much equipment was needed, and so many specialties had to be coordinated, that the solitary genius with only a few assistants hadn't a chance. Nevertheless, it's a pity. It's destroyed initiative in many promising young men. The top man is no longer a scientist at all—he's an administrator with some technical background. The lower ranks do have to exercise ingenuity, yes, but only along the lines they are ordered to follow. If some interesting sideline crops up, they can't investigate it. All they can do is submit a memorandum to the chief, and most likely if anything is done it will be carried out by someone else."

"What would you do about it?" shrugged Lancaster. "You just admitted that the old-time genius in a garret can't compete."

"No—but the small team of creative specialists, each with an excellent understanding of the others' fields, and each working in a loose, free-willed cooperation with the rest, can. Indeed, the results will be much better. It was tried once, you may know. The early cybernetics men, back in the last century, worked that way."

"I wish we could co-opt some biologists and psychologists into this," murmured Rakkan. His English was good, though indescribably accented by his vocal apparatus. "The cellular and neural implications of dielectricity look—promising. Maybe later."
"Well," said Lancaster defensively, "a large Project can be made more secure—less chance of leakage."

Hwang said nothing, but he cocked an eyebrow at an almost treasonable angle.

In going through Sophoulis' equations, Lancaster found what he believed was the flaw that was blocking progress. The man had used a simplified quantum mechanics without correction for relativistic effects. That made for neater mathematics but overlooked certain space-time aspects of the psi function. The error was excusable, for Sophoulis had not been familiar with the Belloni matrix, a mathematical tool that brought order into what was otherwise incomprehensible chaos. Belloni's work was still classified information, being too useful, in the design of new alloys, for general consumption. Lancaster went happily to work correcting the equations. But when he was finished, he realized that he had no business showing his results without proper clearance.

He wandered glumly into the lab. Karen was there alone, setting up an apparatus for the next attempt at heat treatment. A smock covered her into shapelessness, and her spectacular hair was bound up in a kerchief, but she still looked good. Lancaster, a shy man, was more susceptible to her than he wanted to be.

"Where's Berg?" he asked.

"Back on Earth with Jessup," she told him. "Why?"

"Damn! It holds up the whole business till he returns." Lancaster explained his difficulty.

Karen laughed. "Oh, that's all right," she said in the low voice he liked to hear. "We've all been cleared."

"Not officially. I've got to see the papers."

She glared at him then and stamped her foot. "How stupid can you get without having to be spoon fed?" she snapped. "You've seen how much we think of regulations here. Let's have those equations, Mac."

"But—blast it, Karen, you don't appreciate the need for security. Berg explained it to me once—how dangerous the rebels are, and how easily they can steal our secrets. And they'll stop at nothing. Do you want another Hemispheric War?"

She looked oddly at him, and when she spoke it was softly. "Allen, do you really believe that?"

"Certainly! It's obvious, isn't it? Our country is maintaining the peace of the Solar System—once we drop the reins, all hell will run away from us."

"What's wrong with setting up a world-wide federation of countries? Most other nations are willing."

"But that—it's not practical!"

"How do you know? It's never been tried."

"Anyway, we can't decide policy. That's just not for us."

"The United States is a democratic country—remember?"

"But—" Lancaster looked away. For a moment he stood unspeaking, and she watched him with grave eyes and said nothing. Then, not really knowing why he did it, he lifted a defiant head. "All right! We'll go ahead—and if Berg sends us all to camp, don't blame me."

"He won't." She laughed and clapped his shoulder. "You know, Allen, there are times when I think you're human after all."

"Thanks," he grinned wryly. "How about—uh—how about having a—a b-beer with me now? To celebrate."

"Why, sure."

They went down to the shop. A cooler of beer was there, its contents being reckoned as among the essential supplies brought from Earth by Jessup. Lancaster uncapped two bottles, and he and Karen sat down on a bench, swinging their legs and looking over the silent, waiting machines. Most of the station personnel were off duty now, in the arbitrary "night."

He sighed at last. "I like it here."

"I'm glad you do, Allen."

"It's a funny place, but I like it. The station and all its wacky inhabitants. They're heterodox as the very devil and would have trouble getting a dog catcher's job back home, but they're all refreshing." Lancaster snapped his fingers. "Say, that's it! That's why you're all out here. The government needs your talents, and you aren't quite trusted, so you're put here out of range of spies. Right?"

"Do you have to see a rebel with notebook in hand under every bed?" she asked with a hint of weariness. "The First Amendment hasn't been repealed yet, they say. Theoretically we're all entitled to our own opinions."

"Okay, okay, I won't argue politics. Tell me about some of the people here, will you? They're an odd bunch."

"I can't tell you much, Allen. That's where Security does apply. Isaacson is a Martian colonist, you've probably guessed that already. Jessup lost his hand in a—a fight with some enemies once. The Dufreres had a son who was killed in the Moroccan incident. " Lancaster remembered that that affair had involved American power used to crush a French spy ring centered in North Africa. Sovereignty had been brushed aside. But damn it, you had to preserve the status quo, for your own survival if nothing else. "Hwang had to go into exile when the Chinese government changed hands a few years back. I—"
"Yes?" he asked when her voice faded out.

"Oh, I might as well tell you. My husband and I lived in America after our marriage. He was a good

biotechnician and had a job with one of the big pharmaceutical companies. Only he—went to camp. Later he died or

was shot, I don't know which." Her words were flat.

"That's a shame," he said inadequately.

"The funny part of it is, he wasn't engaged in treason at all. He was quite satisfied with things as they were—
oh, he talked a little, but so does everybody. I imagine some rival or enemy put the finger on him."

"Those things happen," said Lancaster. "It's too bad, but they happen."

"They're bound to occur in a police state," she said. "Sorry. We weren't going to argue politics, were we?"

"I never said the world was perfect, Karen. Far from it. Only what alternative have we got? Any change is

likely to be so dangerous that—well, man can't afford mistakes."

"No, he can't. But I wonder if he isn't making one right now. Oh, well. Give me another beer."

They talked on indifferent subjects till Karen said it was her bedtime. Lancaster escorted her to her apartment.

She looked at him curiously as he said good night, and then went inside and closed the door. Lancaster had trouble

getting to sleep.

The corrected equations provided an adequate theory of super-dielectricity—a theory with tantalizing hints

about still other phenomena—and gave the research team a precise idea of what they wanted in the way of crystal

structure. Actually, the substance to be formed was only semi-crystalline, with plastic features as well, all

interwoven with a grid of carbon-linked atoms. Now the trick was to produce that stuff. Calculation revealed what

elements would be needed, and what spatial arrangement—only how did you get the atoms to assume the required

configuration and hook up in the right way?

Theory would get you only so far, thereafter it was cut and try. Lancaster rolled up his sleeves with the rest and

let Karen take over the leadership—she was the best experimenter. He spent some glorious and all but sleepless

weeks, greasy, dirty, living in a jungle of haywired apparatus with a restless slide rule. There were plenty of failures,

a lot of heartbeat and profanity, an occasional injury—but they kept going, and they got there.

The day came—or was it the night?—when Karen took a slab of darkly shining substance out of the furnace

where it had been heat-aging. Rakkan sawed it into several chunks for testing. It was Lancaster who worked on the

electric properties.

He applied voltage till his generator groaned, and watched in awe as meters climbed and climbed without any

sign of stopping. He discharged the accumulated energy in a single blue flare that filled the lab with thunder and

ozone. He tested for time lag of an electric signal and wondered wildly if it didn't feel like sleeping on its weary

path.

The reports came in, excited yells from one end of the long, cluttered room to the other, exultant whoops and

men pounding each other on the back. This was it! This was the treasure at the rainbow's end.

They sang then, sang till heads appeared at the door and the

glassware shivered.

Here we go 'round the mulberry bush,

The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush—

It called for a celebration. The end of a Project meant no more than filing a last report and waiting for the next

assignment, but they ran things differently out here. Somebody broke out a case of Venusian aguacaliente.

Somebody else led the way to a storeroom, tossed its contents into the hall, and festooned it with used computer

tape. Rakkan forgot his Martian dignity and fiddled for a square dance, with Isaacson doing the calling. The folk

from the other end of the station swarmed in till the place overflowed. It was quite a party.

Hours later, Lancaster was hazily aware of lying stretched on the floor. His head was in Karen's lap and she

was stroking his hair. The hardy survivors were following the Dufreses in French drinking songs, which are the best

in the known universe. Rakkan's fiddle wove in and out, a lovely accompaniment to voices that were untrained but

made rich and alive by triumph.
"Sur ma tomb' je veux qu'on inscrive:
'Ici-git le roi des buveurs.'
Sur ma tomb' je veux qu'on inscrive:
'Ici-git le roi des buveurs.
Ici-git, oui, oui, oui,
Ici-git, non, non, non—'
Lancaster knew that he had never been really happy before.
Berg showed up a couple of days later, looking worried. Lancaster's vacation time was almost up. When he heard the news, his eyes snapped gleefully and he pumped the physicist's hand. "Good work, boy!"
"There are things to clean up yet," said Lancaster, "but it's all detail. Anybody can do it."
"And the material—what do you call it, anyway?"
Karen grinned. "So far, we've only named it ffuts," she said. "That's 'stuff' spelled backward."
"Okay, okay. It's easy to manufacture?"
"Sure. Now that we know how, anybody can make it in his own home—if he's handy at tinkering apparatus together."
"Fine, fine! Just what was needed. This is the ticket. Berg turned back to Lancaster. "Okay, boy, you can pack now. We blast again in a few hours."
The physicist shuffled his feet. "What are my chances of getting re-assigned back here?" he asked. "I've liked it immensely. And now that I know about it anyway—"
"I'll see. I'll see. But remember, this is top secret. You go back to your regular job and don't say a word on this to anyone less than the President—no matter what happens, understand?"
"Of course," snapped Lancaster, irritated. "I know my duty."
"Yeah, so you do." Berg sighed. "So you do."
Leavetaking was tough for all concerned. They had grown fond of the quiet, bashful man—and as for him, he wondered how he'd get along among normal people. These were his sort. Karen wept openly and kissed him goodbye with a fervor that haunted his dreams afterward. Then she stumbled desolately back to her quarters. Even Berg looked glum.
He regained his cockiness on the trip home, though, and insisted on talking all the way. Lancaster, who wanted to be alone with his thoughts, was annoyed, but you don't insult a Security man.
"You understand the importance of this whole business, and why it has to be secret?" nagged Berg. "I'm not thinking of the scientific and industrial applications, but the military ones."
"Oh, sure. You can make lightning throwers if you want to. And you've overcome the fuel problem. With a few ffuts accumulators, charged from any handy power source, you can build fuelless military vehicles, which would simplify your logistics immensely. And some really deadly hand guns could be built—pistols the equivalent of a cannon, almost." Lancaster's voice was dead. "So what?"
"So plenty! Those are only a few of the applications. If you use your imagination, you can think of dozens more. And the key point is—the ffuts and the essential gadgetry using it are cheap to make in quantity, easy to handle—the perfect weapon for the citizen soldier. Or for the rebel! It isn't enough to decide the outcome of a war all by itself, but it may very well be precisely the extra element which will tip the military balance against the government. And I've already discussed what that means."
"Yes, I remember. That's your department, not mine. Just let me forget about it."
"You'd better," said Berg.
In the month after his return, Lancaster lived much as usual. He was scolded a few times for an increasing absent-mindedness and a lack of enthusiasm on the Project, but that wasn't too serious. He became more of an introvert than ever. Having some difficulty with getting to sleep, he resorted to soporifics and then, in a savage reaction, to stimulants. But outwardly there was little to show the turmoil within him.
He didn't know what to think. He had always been a loyal citizen—not a fanatic, but loyal—and it wasn't easy for him to question his own basic assumptions. But he had experienced something utterly alien to what he considered normal, and he had found the strangeness more congenial—more human in every way—than the norm. He had breathed a different atmosphere, and it couldn't but seem to him that the air of Earth was tainted. He re-read Kipling's Chant-Pagan with a new understanding, and began to search into neglected philosophies. He studied the news in detail, and his critical eye soon grew jaundiced—did this editorial or that feature story have any semantic content at all, or was it only a tom-tom beat of loaded connotations? The very statements of fact were subject to doubt—they should be checked against other accounts, or better yet against direct observation; but other accounts were forbidden and there was no chance to see for himself.
He took to reading seditious pamphlets with some care, and listened to a number of underground broadcasts,
and tried clumsily to sound out those of his acquaintances whom he suspected of rebellious thoughts. It all had to be done very cautiously, with occasional nightmare moments when he thought he was being spied on; and was it right that a man should be afraid to hear a dissenting opinion?

He wondered what his son was doing. It occurred to him that modern education existed largely to stultify independent thought.

At the same time, he was unable to discard the beliefs of his whole life. Sedition was sedition and treason was treason—you couldn't evade that fact. There were no more wars—plenty of minor clashes, but no real wars. There was a stable economy, and nobody lacked for the essentials. The universal state might be a poor solution to the problems of a time of troubles, but it was nevertheless a solution. Change would be unthinkably dangerous.

Dangerous to whom? To the entrenched powers and their jackals. But the oppressed peoples of Earth had nothing to lose, really, except their lives, and many of them seemed quite willing to sacrifice those. Did the rights of man stop at a full belly, or was there more?

He tried to take refuge in cynicism. After all, he was well off. He was a successful jackal. But that wouldn't work either. He required a more basic philosophy.

One thing that held him back was the thought that if he became a rebel, he would be pitted against his friends—not only those of Earth, but that strange joyous crew out in space. He couldn't see fighting against them.

Then there was the very practical consideration that he hadn't the faintest idea of how to contact the underground even if he wanted to. And he'd make a hell of a poor conspirator.

He was still in an unhappy and undecided whirlpool when the monitors came for him.

They knocked on the door at midnight, as was their custom, and he felt such an utter panic that he could barely make it across the apartment to let them in. The four burly men wavered before his eyes, and there was a roaring and a darkness in his head. They arrested him without ceremony on suspicion of treason, which meant that habeas corpus and even the right of trial didn't apply. Two of them escorted him to a car, the other two stayed to search his dwelling.

At headquarters, he was put in a cell and left to stew for some hours. Then a pair of men in the uniform of the federal police led him to a questioning chamber. He was given a chair and a smiling, soft-voiced man—almost fatherly, with his plump cheeks and white hair—offered him a cigarette and began talking to him.

"Just relax, Dr. Lancaster. This is pretty routine. If you've nothing to hide then you've nothing to fear. Just tell the truth."

"Of course." It was a dry whisper.

"Oh, you're thirsty. So sorry. Alec, get Dr. Lancaster a glass of water, will you, please? And by the way, my name is Harris. Let's call this a friendly conference, eh?"

Lancaster drank avidly. Harris' manner was disarming, and the physicist felt more at ease. This was—well, it was just a mistake. Or maybe a simple spot check. Nothing to fear. He wouldn't be sent to camp—not he. Such things happened to other people, not to Allen Lancaster.

"You've been immunized against neoscop?" asked Harris.

"Yes. It's routine for my rank and over, you know. In case we should ever be kidnapped—but why am I telling you this?" Lancaster tried to smile. His face felt stiff.

"Hm. Yes. Too bad."

"Of course, I've no objection at all to your using a lie detector on me."

"Fine, fine." Harris beamed and gestured to one of the expressionless policemen. A table was wheeled forth, bearing the instrument. "I'm glad you're so cooperative, Dr. Lancaster. You've no idea how much trouble it saves me—and you."

They ran a few harmless calibrating questions. Then Harris said, still smiling, "And now tell me, Dr. Lancaster. Where were you really this summer?"

Lancaster felt his heart leap into his throat, and knew in a sudden terror that the dials were registering his reaction. "Why—I took my vacation," he stammered. "I was in the Southwest—"

"Mmmm—the machine doesn't quite agree with you." Harris remained impishly cheerful.

"But it's true! You can check back and—"

"There are such things as doubles, you know. Come, come, now, let's not waste the whole night. We both have many other things to do."

"I—look." Lancaster gulped down his panic and tried to speak calmly. "Suppose I am lying. The machine should tell you that I'm not doing so out of disloyalty. There are things I can't tell anyone without clearance. Like if you asked me about my work on the Project—I can't tell you that. Why don't you check through regular Security channels? There was a man named Berg—at least he called himself that. You'll find that it's all perfectly okay with Security."
"You can tell me anything," said Harris gently.

"I can't tell you this. Not anybody short of the President." Lancaster caught himself. "Of course, that's assuming

that I did really spend the summer other than my vacation. But—"

Harris sighed. "I was afraid of this. I'm sorry, Lancaster." He nodded to his policemen. "Go ahead, boys."

Lancaster kept sliding into unconsciousness. They jolted him back to life with stimulant injections and vigorous

slaps and resumed working on him. Now and then they would let up and Harris' face would swim out of a haze of

pain, smiling, friendly, sympathetic, offering him a smoke or a shot of whiskey. Lancaster sobbed and wanted more

than anything else in the world to do as that kindly man asked. But he didn't dare. He knew what happened to those

who revealed state secrets.

Finally he was thrown back into his cell and left to himself. When he recovered from his faint—that was a very

slow process—he had no idea of how many hours or days had gone by. There was a water tap in the room and he

drank thirstily, vomited the liquid up again, and sat with his head in his hands.

So far, he thought dully, they hadn't done too much to him. He was short several teeth, and there were some

broken fingers and toes, and maybe a floating kidney. The other bruises, lacerations, and burns would heal all right

if they got the chance.

Only they wouldn't.

He wondered vaguely how Security had gotten onto his track. Berg's precautions had been very thorough. So

thorough, apparently, that Harris could find no trace of what had really happened that summer, and was going only

on suspicion. But what had made him suspicious in the first place? An anonymous tip-off—from whom? Maybe

some enemy, some rival on the Project, had chosen this way of getting rid of his sector chief.

In the end, Lancaster thought wearily, he'd tell. Why not do it now? Then—probably—he'd only be shot for

betraying Berg's confidence. That would be the easy way out.

No. He'd hang on for awhile yet. There was always a faint chance.

His cell door opened and two guards came in. He was past flinching from them, but he had to be supported on

his way to the questioning room.

Harris sat there, still smiling. "How do you do, Dr. Lancaster," he said politely.

"Not so well, thank you." The grin hurt his face.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But really, it's your own fault. You know that."

"I can't tell you anything," said Lancaster. "I'm under Security oath. I can't speak of this to anyone below the

President."

Harris looked annoyed. "Don't you think the President has better things to do than come running to every

enemy of the state that yaps after him?"

"There's been some mistake, I tell you," pleaded Lancaster.

"I'll say there has. And you're the one that's made it. Go ahead, boys." Harris picked up a magazine and started

reading.

After awhile, Lancaster focused his mind on Karen Marek and kept it there. That helped him bear up. If they

knew, out in the station, what was happening to him, they—well, they wouldn't forget him, try to pretend they'd

never known him, as the little fearful people of Earth did. They'd speak up, and do their damnedest to save their

friend.

The blows seemed to come from very far away. They didn't do things like this out in the station. Lancaster

realized the truth at that moment, but it held no surprise. The most natural thing in the world. And now, of course,

he'd never talk.

Maybe.

When he woke up, there was a man before him. The face blurred, seemed to grow to monstrous size and then

move out to infinite distances. The voice of Harris had a ripple in it, wavering up and down, up and down.

"All right, Lancaster, here's the President. Since you insist, here he is."

"Go ahead, American," said the man. "Tell me. It's your duty."

"No," said Lancaster.

"But I am the President. You wanted to see me."

"Most likely a double. Prove your identity."

The man who looked like the President sighed and turned away.

Lancaster woke up again lying on a cot. He must have been brought awake by a stimulant, for a white-coated

figure was beside him, holding a hypodermic syringe. Harris was there too, looking exasperated.

"Can you talk?" he asked.

"I—yes." Lancaster's voice was a dull croak. He moved his head, feeling the ache of it.

"Look here, fellow," said Harris. "We've been pretty easy with you so far. Nothing has happened to you that
can't be patched up. But we're getting impatient now. It's obvious that you're a traitor and hiding something."

Well, yes, thought Lancaster, he was a traitor, by one definition. Only it seemed to him that a man had a right to choose his own loyalties. Having experienced what the police state meant, he would have been untrue to himself if he had yielded to it.

"If you don't answer my questions in the next session," said Harris, "we'll have to start getting really rough."

Lancaster remained silent. It was too much effort to try to speak.

"Don't think you're being heroic," said Harris. "There's nothing pretty or even very human about a man under interrogation. You've been screaming as loud as anybody."

Lancaster looked away.

He heard the doctor's voice. "I'd advice giving him a few days' rest before starting again, sir."

"You're new here, aren't you?" asked Harris.

"Yes, sir. I was only assigned to this duty a few weeks ago."

"Well, we don't put on kid gloves for traitors."

"That's not what I mean, sir," said the doctor. "There are limits to pain beyond which further treatment simply doesn't register. Also, I'm a little suspicious about this man's heart. It has a murmur, and questioning puts a terrific strain on it. You wouldn't want him to die on your hands, would you, sir?"

"Mmmm—no. What do you advise?"

"Just a few days in the hospital, with treatment and rest. It'll also have a psychological effect as he thinks of what's waiting for him."

Harris considered for a moment. "All right. I've got enough other things to do anyway."

"Very good, sir. You won't regret this."

Lancaster heard the footsteps retreat into silence. Presently the doctor came around to stand facing him. He was a short, curly-haired man of undistinguished appearance. For a moment they locked eyes, then Lancaster closed his. He wanted to tell the doctor to go away, but it wasn't worth the trouble.

Later he was put on a stretcher and carried down endless halls to another cell. This one had a hospital look about it, somehow, and the air was sharp with the smell of antiseptics. The doctor came when he was installed in bed and took his arm and slipped a needle into it. "Sleepy time," he said.

Lancaster drifted away again.

When he woke up, he felt darkness and movement. He looked around, wondering if he had gone blind, and the breath moaned out between his bruised lips. A hand was laid on his shoulder and a voice spoke out of the black.

"It's okay, fella. Take it easy. There'll be no more questions."

It was the doctor's voice, and the doctor looked nothing at all like Charon, but still Lancaster wondered if he weren't being ferried over the river of death. There was a thrumming all about him, and he heard a low keening of wind. "Where are we going?" he mumbled.

"Away. You're in a stratorocket now. Just take it easy."

Lancaster fell asleep after awhile.

Beyond that there was a drugged, confused period where he was only dimly aware of moving and trying to talk. Shadows floated across his vision, shadows telling him something he couldn't quite grasp. He followed obediently enough. Full clarity came eventually, and he was lying in a bunk looking up at a metal ceiling. The shivering pulse of rockets trembled in his body. A spaceship?

A spaceship!

He sat up, heart thudding, and looked wildly around. "Hey!" he cried.

The remembered figure of Berg came through the door. "Hullo, Allen," he said. "How're you feeling?"

"I—you—" Lancaster sank weakly back to his pillow. He grew aware that he was thoroughly bandaged, splinted, and braced, and that there was no more pain. Not much, anyway.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Good, good. The doc says you'll be okay," Berg sat down on the edge of the bunk. "I can't stay here long, but the hell with it. We'll be at the station soon. You deserve to know some things, such as that you've been rescued."

"Well, that's obvious," said Lancaster.

"By us. The rebels. The underground. Subversive characters."

"That's obvious too. And thanks—" The word was so ridiculously inadequate that Lancaster had to laugh.

"I suppose you've guessed most of it already," said Berg. "We needed a scientist of your caliber for our project. One thing we're desperately short of is technical personnel, since the only real education in such lines is to be had on Earth and most graduates find comfortable berths in the existing society. Like you, for instance. So we played a trick on you. We used part of our organization—yes, we have a big one, and it's pretty smart and powerful too—to convince you this was a government job of top secrecy. More damn things can be done in the name of Security—"
Berg clicked his tongue. "Everybody you saw at the station was more or less play-acting, of course. The whole thing was set up to fool you. We might not have gotten away with it if we'd used some other person, more shrewd about such things, but we'd studied you and knew you for an amiable, unsuspicious guy, too wrapped up in your own work to go witch-smelling."

"I guessed that much," admitted Lancaster. "After I'd been in the cells for awhile. Your way of living and thinking was so different from anything like—"

"Yeah. I'm sorry as hell about that, Allen. We thought you could just return to ordinary life, but somehow—through one of those accidents or malices inevitable in a state where every man spies on his neighbor—you were hauled in. We knew of it at once—yes, we've even infiltrated the secret police—and decided to do something about it. Quite apart from the danger of your betraying what you knew—we could have eliminated that by quietly murdering you—there was the fact that we'd gotten you into this and did owe you something. We managed to get Dr. Pappas transferred to the inquisitory where you were being held. He drugged you, producing a remarkably corpse-like figure, and smuggled you out as simply another one who'd died under questioning. I used my Security papers to get the body for special autopsy instead of the usual immediate cremation. Then we simply drove till we reached the stratorocket we'd arranged to have ready, and you were flown to our spaceboat, and now you're on the way back to the station. You were kept under drugs most of the way to help you rest—they'd knocked you around quite a bit in the inquisitory. So—" Berg shrugged. "Pappas can't go back to Earth now, of course, but we can always use a medic in space, and it was well worth the trouble to rescue you."

"I'm honored," said Lancaster.

"I still feel like hell about what happened to you, though."

"It's all right. I can't say I enjoyed it, but now that I've learned some hard facts—oh, well, forget the painful nature of the lesson. I'll be okay. And I'm glad!"

Jessup supported Lancaster as they entered the space station. His old crew was there waiting to greet him. They were all immensely pleased to have him back, though Karen wept bitterly on his shoulder.

"It's all right," he told her. "I'm not in such bad shape as I look. Honest, Karen, I'm all right. And now that I have gotten back, and know where I really belong—damn, but it was worth it!"

She looked at him with eyes as gray as a rainy dawn. "And you are with us?" she whispered. "You're one of us? Of your own will?"

"Of course I am. Give me a week or two to rest, and I'll be back in the lab bossing all of you like a Simon Legree. Hell, we've just begun on that super-dielectricity. And there are a lot of other things I want to try out, too."

"It means exile," she said. "No more blue skies and green valleys and ocean winds. No more going back to Earth."

"Well, there are other planets, aren't there? And we'll go back to Earth in the next decade, I bet. Back to start a new American Revolution and write the Bill of Rights in the sky for all to see." Lancaster grinned shyly. "I'm not much at making speeches, and I certainly don't like to listen to them. But I've learned the truth and I want to say it out loud. The right of man to be free is the most basic one he's got, and when he gives that up he finishes by surrendering everything else too. You people are fighting to bring back honesty and liberty and the possibility of progress. I hope nobody here is a fanatic, because fanaticism is exactly what we're fighting against. I say we, because from now on I'm one of you. That is, if you're sure you want me."

He stopped, clumsily. "Okay. Speech ended."


"Get to bed with you," ordered Pappas.

Jessup led Lancaster off, and one by one the others drifted back to their jobs. Finally only Karen and Berg stood by the airlock.

"You keep your beautiful mouth shut, my dear," said the man.

"Oh, sure." Karen sighed unhappily. "I wish I'd never learned your scheme. When you explained it to me I wanted to shoot you."

"You insisted on an explanation," said Berg defensively. "When Allen was due to go back to Earth, you wanted us to tell him who we were and keep him. But it wouldn't have worked. I've studied his dossier, and he's not the kind of man to switch loyalties that easily. If we were to have him at all, it could only be with his full consent. And now we've got him."

"It was still a lousy trick," she said.

"Of course it was. But we had no choice. We had to have a first-rate physicist."

"You know," she said, "you're a rat from way back."

"That I am. And by and large, I enjoy it." Berg grimaced. "Though I must admit this job leaves a bad taste in
my mouth. I like Allen. It was the hardest thing I ever did, tipping off the federal police about him."

He turned on his heel and walked away, smiling faintly.
"All passengers, will you pay attention, please?" All the high-fidelity speakers of the starship Procyon spoke as one, in the skillfully-modulated voice of the trained announcer. "This is the fourth and last cautionary announcement. Any who are not seated will seat themselves at once. Prepare for take-off acceleration of one and one-half gravities; that is, everyone will weigh one-half again as much as his normal Earth weight for about fifteen minutes. We lift in twenty seconds; I will count down the final five seconds.... Five ... Four ... Three ... Two ... One ... Lift!"

The immense vessel rose from her berth; slowly at first, but with ever-increasing velocity; and in the main lounge, where many of the passengers had gathered to watch the dwindling Earth, no one moved for the first five minutes. Then a girl stood up.

She was not a startlingly beautiful girl; no more so than can be seen fairly often, of a summer afternoon, on Seaside Beach. Her hair was an artificial yellow. Her eyes were a deep, cool blue. Her skin, what could be seen of it—she was wearing breeches and a long-sleeved shirt—was lightly tanned. She was only about five-feet-three, and her build was not spectacular. However, every ounce of her one hundred fifteen pounds was exactly where it should have been.

First she stood tentatively, flexing her knees and testing her weight. Then, stepping boldly out into a clear space, she began to do a high-kicking acrobatic dance; and went on doing it as effortlessly and as rhythmically as though she were on an Earthly stage.

"You mustn't do that, Miss!" A stewardess came bustling up. Or, rather, not exactly bustling. Very few people, and almost no stewardesses, either actually bustle in or really enjoy one point five gees. "You really must resume your seat, Miss. I must insist.... Oh, you're Miss Warner...."

She paused.

"That's right, Barbara Warner. Cabin two eight one."

"But really, Miss Warner, it's regulations, and if you should fall...."

"Foosh to regulations, and pfui on 'em. I won't fall. I've been wondering, every time out, if I could do a thing, and now I'm going to find out."

Jackknifing double, she put both forearms flat on the carpet and lifted both legs into the vertical. Then, silver slippers pointing motionlessly ceilingward, she got up onto her hands and walked twice around a vacant chair. She then performed a series of flips that would have done credit to a professional acrobat; the finale of which left her sitting calmly in the previously empty seat.

"See?" she informed the flabbergasted stewardess. "I could do it, and I didn't...."

Her voice was drowned out in a yell of approval as everybody who could clap their hands did so with enthusiasm. "More!" "Keep it up, gal!" "Do it again!"

"Oh, I didn't do that to show off!" Barbara Warner flushed hotly as she met the eyes of the nearby spectators. "Honestly I didn't--I just had to know if I could." Then, as the applause did not die down, she fairly scampered out of the room.

* * * * *

For one hour before the Procyon's departure from Earth and for three hours afterward, First Officer Carlyle Deston, Chief Electronicist, sat attentively at his board. He was five feet eight inches tall and weighed one hundred sixty-two pounds net. Just a little guy, as spacemen go. Although narrow-waisted and, for his heft, broad-shouldered, he was built for speed and maneuverability, not to haul freight.

Watching a hundred lights and half that many instruments, listening to two phone circuits, one with each ear, and hands moving from switches to rheostats to buttons and levers, he was completely informed as to the instant-by-instant status of everything in his department.

Although attentive, he was not tense, even during the countdown. The only change was that at the word "Two" his right forefinger came to rest upon a red button and his eyes doubled their rate of scan. If anything in his department had gone wrong, the Procyon's departure would have been delayed.

And again, well out beyond the orbit of the moon, just before the starship's mighty Chaytor engines hurled her out of space as we know it into that unknowable something that is hyperspace, he poised a finger.
too, was normal; all the green lights except one went out, needles dropped to zero, both phones went dead, all signals stopped. He plugged a jack into a socket below the one remaining green light and spoke:

"Procyon One to Control Six. Flight Eight Four Nine. Subspace Radio Test One. How do you read me, Control Six?"

"Control Six to Procyon One. I read you ten and zero. How do you read me, Procyon One?"

"Ten and zero. Out." Deston flipped a toggle and the solitary green light went out.

Perfect signal and zero noise. That was that. From now until Emergence—unless something happened—he might as well be a passenger. Everything was automatic, unless and until some robot or computer yelled for help. Deston leaned back in his bucket seat and lighted a cigarette. He didn't need to scan the board constantly now; any trouble signal would jump right out at him.

Promptly at Dee plus Three Zero Zero—three hours, no minutes, no seconds after departure—his relief appeared.

"All black, Babe?" the newcomer asked.

"As the pit, Eddie. Take over." Eddie did so. "You've picked out your girl friend for the trip, I suppose?"

"Not yet. I got sidetracked watching Bobby Warner. She was doing handstands and handwalks and forward and back flips in the lounge—under one point five gees yet. Wow! And after that all the other women looked like a dime's worth of catmeat. She doesn't stand out too much until she starts to move, but then—Oh, brother!" Eddie rolled his eyes, made motions with his hands, and whistled expressively. "Talk about poetry in motion! Just walking across a stage, she'd bring down the house and stop the show cold in its tracks."

"O. K., O. K., don't blow a fuse," Deston said, resignedly. "I know. You'll love her undyingly; all this trip, maybe. So bring her up, next watch, and I'll give her a gold badge. As usual."

"You ... how dumb can you get?" Eddie demanded. "D'you think I'd even try to play footsie with Barbara Warner?"

"You'd play footsie with the Archangel Michael's sister if she'd let you; and she probably would. So who's Barbara Warner?"

Eddie Thompson gazed at his superior pityingly. "I know you're ten nines per cent monk, Babe, but I did think you pulled your nose out of the megacycles often enough to learn a few of the facts of life. Did you ever hear of Warner Oil?"

"I think so." Deston thought for a moment. "Found a big new field, didn't they? In South America somewhere?"

"Just the biggest on Earth, is all. And not only on Earth. He operates in all the systems for a hundred parsecs around, and he never sinks a dry hole. Every well he drills is a gusher that blows the rig clear up into the stratosphere. Everybody wonders how he does it. My guess is that his wife's an oil-witch, which is why he lugs his whole family along wherever he goes. Why else would he?"

"Maybe he loves her. It happens, you know."

"Huh?" Eddie snorted. "After twenty years of her? Comet-gas! Anyway, would you have the sublime gall to make passes at Warner Oil's heiress, with more millions in her own sock than you've got dimes?"

"I don't make passes."

"That's right, you don't. Only at books and tapes, even on ground leaves; more fool you. Well, then, would you marry anybody like that?"

"Certainly, if I loved...." Deston paused, thought a moment, then went on: "Maybe I wouldn't, either. She'd make me dress for dinner. She'd probably have a live waiter; maybe even a butler. So I guess I wouldn't, at that."

"You nor me neither, brother. But what a dish! What a lovely, luscious, toothsome dish!" Eddie mourned.

"You'll be raving about another one tomorrow," Deston said, unfeelingly, as he turned away. "I don't know; but even if I do, she won't be anything like her," Eddie said, to the closing door.

And Deston, outside the door, grinned sardonically to himself. Before his next watch, Eddie would bring up one of the prettiest girls aboard for a gold badge; the token that would let her—under approved escort, of course—go through the Top.

He himself never went down to the Middle, which was passenger territory. There was nothing there he wanted. He was too busy, had too many worthwhile things to do, to waste time that way ... but the hunch was getting stronger and stronger all the time. For the first time in all his three years of deep-space service he felt an overpowering urge to go down into the very middle of the Middle; to the starship's main lounge.

He knew that his hunches were infallible. At cards, dice, or wheels he had always had hunches and he had always won. That was why he had stopped gambling, years before, before anybody found out. He was that kind of a man.

Apart from the matter of unearned increment, however, he always followed his hunches; but this one he did not like at all. He had been resisting it for hours, because he had never visited the lounge and did not want to visit it now. But something down there was pulling like a tractor, so he went. He didn't go to his cabin; didn't even take off
his side-arm. He didn't even think of it; the .41 automatic at his hip was as much a part of his uniform as his pants.

Entering the lounge, he did not have to look around. She was playing bridge, and as eyes met eyes and she rose to her feet a shock-wave swept through him that made him feel as though his every hair was standing straight on end.

"Excuse me, please," she said to the other three at her table. "I must go now." She tossed her cards down onto the table and walked straight toward him; eyes still holding eyes.

He backed hastily out into the corridor, and as the door closed behind her they went naturally and wordlessly into each other's arms. Lips met lips in a kiss that lasted for a long, long time. It was not a passionate embrace--passion would come later--it was as though each of them, after endless years of bootless, fruitless longing, had come finally home.

"Come with me, dear, where we can talk," she said, finally; eying with disfavor the half-dozen highly interested spectators.

And a couple of minutes later, in cabin two hundred eighty-one, Deston said: "So this is why I had to come down into passenger territory. You came aboard at exactly zero seven forty-three."

"Uh-uh." She shook her yellow head. "A few minutes before that. That was when I read your name in the list of officers on the board. First Officer, Carlyle Deston. I got a tingle that went from the tips of my toes up and out through the very ends of my hair. Nothing like when we actually saw each other, of course. We both knew the truth, then. It's wonderful that you're so strongly psychic, too."

"I don't know about that," he said, thoughtfully. "All my training has been based on the axiomatic fact that the map is not the territory. Psionics, as I understand it, holds that the map is--practically--the territory, but can't prove it. So I simply don't know what to believe. On one hand, I have had real hunches all my life. On the other, the signal doesn't carry much information. More like hearing a siren when you're driving along a street. You know you have to pull over and stop, but that's all you know. It could be police, fire ambulance--anything. Anybody with any psionic ability at all ought to do a lot better than that, I should think."

"Not necessarily. You've been fighting it. Ninety-nine per cent of your mind doesn't want to believe it; is dead set against it. So it has to force its way through whillions and skillions of ohms of resistance, so only the most powerful stimuli--'maximum signal' in your jargon, perhaps?--can get through to you at all." Suddenly she giggled like a schoolgirl. "You're either psychic or the biggest wolf in the known universe, and I know you aren't a wolf. If you hadn't been as psychic as I am, you'd've jumped clear out into subspace when a perfectly strange girl attacked you."

"How do you know so much about me?"
"I made it a point to. One of the juniors told me you're the only virgin officer in all space."
"That was Eddie Thompson."
"Uh-huh." She nodded brightly. "Well, is that bad?"
"Anything else but. That is, he thought it was terrible--outrageous--a betrayal of the whole officer caste--but to me it makes everything just absolutely perfect."
"Me, too. How soon can we get married?"
"I'd say right now, except.... She caught her lower lip between her teeth and thought. "No, no 'except'. Right now, or as soon as you can. You can't, without resigning, can you? They'd fire you?"
"Don't worry about that," he grinned. "My record is good enough, I think, to get a good ground job. Even if they fire me for not waiting until we ground, there's lots of jobs. I can support you, sweetheart."
"Oh, I know you can. I wasn't thinking of that. You wouldn't like a ground job."
"What difference does that make?" he asked, in honest surprise. "A man grows up. I couldn't have you with me in space, and I'd like that a lot less. No, I'm done with space, as of now. But what was that 'except' business?"
"Oh, I thought at first I'd tell my parents first--they're both aboard--but I decided not to. She'd scream bloody murder and he'd roar like a lion and none of it would make me change my mind, so we'll get married first."

He looked at her questioningly; she shrugged and went on: "We aren't what you'd call a happy family. She's been trying to make me marry an old goat of a prince and I finally told her to go roll her hoop--to get a divorce and marry the foul old beast herself. And to consolidate two empires, he's been wanting me to marry a multi-billionaire--who is also a louse and a crumb and a heel. Last week he insisted on it and I blew up like an atomic bomb. I told him if I got married a thousand times I'd pick every one of my husbands myself, without the least bit of help from either him or her. I'd keep on finding oil and stuff for him, I said, but that was all...."

"Oil!" Deston exclaimed, involuntarily, as everything fell into place in his mind. The way she walked; poetry in motion ... the oil-witch ... two empires ... more millions than he had dimes.... "Oh, you're Barbara Warner, then."
"Why, of course; but my friends call me 'Bobby'. Didn't you--but of course you didn't--you never read passenger lists. If you did, you've got a tingle, too."

"I got plenty of tingle without reading, believe me. However, I never expected to-----"

"Don't say it, dear!" She got up and took both his hands in hers. "I know how you feel. I don't like to let you ruin your career, either, but nothing can separate us, now that we've found each other. So I'll tell you this." Her eyes looked steadily into his. "If it bothers you the least bit, later on, I'll give every dollar I own to some foundation or other, I swear it."

He laughed shamefacedly as he took her in his arms. "Since that's the way you look at it, it won't bother me a bit."

"Uh-huh, you do mean it." She snuggled her head down into the curve of his neck. "I can tell."

"I know you can, sweetheart." Then he had another thought, and with strong, deft fingers he explored the muscles of her arms and back. "But those acrobatics in plus gee--and you're trained down as hard and fine as I am, and it's my business to be--how come?"

"I majored in Physical Education and I love it. And I'm a Newmartian, you know, so I teach a few courses----" "Newmartian? I've heard--but you aren't a colonial; you're as Terran as I am."

"By blood, yes; but I was born on Newmars. Our actual and legal residence has always been there. The tax situation, you know."

"I don't know, no. Taxes don't bother me much. But go ahead. You teach a few courses. In?"

"Oh, bars, trapeze, ground-and-lofty tumbling, acrobatics, aerialistics, high-wire, muscle-control, judo--all that kind of thing."

"Ouch! So if you ever happen to accidentally get mad at me you'll tie me right up into a pretzel?"

"I doubt it; very seriously. I've tossed lots of two-hundred-pounders around, of course, but they were not space officers." She laughed unaffectedly as she tested his musculature much more professionally and much more thoroughly than he had tested hers. "Definitely I couldn't. A good big man can always take a good little one, you know."

"But I'm not big; I'm just a little squirt. You've probably heard what they call me?"

"Yes, and I'm going to call you 'Babe', too, and mean it the same way they do. Besides, who wants a man a foot taller than she is and twice as big? You're just exactly the right size!"

"That's spreading the good old oil, Bobby, but I'll never tangle with you if I can help it. Buzz-saws are small, too, and sticks of dynamite. Shall we go hunt up the parson--or should it be a priest? Or a rabbi?"

"Even that doesn't make a particle of difference to you."

"Of course not. How could it?"

"A parson, please." Then, with a bright, quick grin: "We have got a lot to learn about each other, haven't we?"

"Some details, of course, but nothing of any importance and we'll have plenty of time to learn them."

"And we'll love every second of it. You'll live down here in the Middle with me, won't you, all the time you aren't actually on duty?"

"I can't imagine doing anything else," and the two set out, arms around each other, to find a minister. And as they strolled along:

"Of course you won't actually need a job, ever, or my money, either. You never even thought of dowsing, did you?"

"Dowsing? Oh, that witch stuff. Of course not."

"Listen, darling. All the time I've been touching you I've been learning about you. And you've been learning about me."

"Yes, but-----"

"No buts, buster. You have really tremendous powers, and they aren't latent, either. All you have to do is quit fighting them and use them. You're ever so much stronger and fuller than I am. All I can do at dowsing is find water, oil, coal, and gas. I'm no good at all on metals--I couldn't feel gold if I were perched right on the roof of Fort Knox; I couldn't feel radium if it were frying me to a crisp. But I'm positive that you can tune yourself to anything you want to find."

He didn't believe it, and the argument went on until they reached the "Reverend's" quarters. Then, of course, it was dropped automatically; and the next five days were deliciously, deliriously, ecstatically happy days for them both.

II.

At the time of this chronicle the status of interstellar flight was very similar to that of intercontinental jet-plane flight in the nineteen-sixties. Starships were designed by humanity's best brains; carried every safety device those brains could devise. They were maintained and serviced by ultra-skilled, ultra-trained, ultra-able crews; they were
operated by the creme-de-la-creme of manhood. Only a man with an extremely capable mind in an extremely capable body could become an officer of a subspacer.

Statistically, starships were the safest means of transportation ever used by man; so safe that Very Important Persons used them regularly, unthinkingly, and as a matter of course. Statistically, the starships' fatality rate per million passenger-light-years was a small fraction of that of the automobiles' per million passenger-miles. Insurance companies offered odds of tens of thousands to one that any given star-traveler would return unharmed from any given star-trip he cared to make.

Nevertheless, accidents happened. A chillingly large number of lives had, as a total, been lost; and no catastrophe had ever been even partially explained. No message of distress or call for help had ever been received. No single survivor had ever been found; nor any piece of wreckage.

And on the Great Wheel of Fate the Procyon's number came up.

In the middle of the night Carlyle Deston came instantaneously awake--feeling with his every muscle and with his every square inch of skin; listening with all the force he could put into his auditory nerves; while deep down in his mind a huge, terribly silent voice continued to yell: "DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!"

In a very small fraction of a second Carlyle Deston moved--and fast. Seizing Barbara by an arm, he leaped out of bed with her.

"We're abandoning ship--get into this suit--quick!"

"But what ... but I've got to dress!"

"No time! Snap it up!" He practically hurled her into her suit; clamped her helmet tight. Then he leaped into his own. "Skipper!" he snapped into the suit's microphone. "Deston. Emergency! Abandon ship!"

The alarm bells clanged once; the big red lights flashed once; the sirens barely started to growl, then quit. The whole vast fabric of the ship trembled and shuddered and shook as though it were being mauled by a thousand impossibly gigantic hammers. Deston did not know and never did find out whether it was his captain or an automatic that touched off the alarm. Whichever it was, the disaster happened so fast that practically no warning at all was given. And out in the corridor:

"Come on, girl--sprint!" He put his arm under hers and urged her along.

She did her best, but in comparison with his trained performance her best wasn't good. "I've never been checked out on sprinting in spacesuits!" she gasped. "Let go of me and go on ahead. I'll follow----"

Everything went out. Lights, gravity, air-circulation--everything.

"You haven't been checked out on free fall, either. Hang onto this tool-hanger here on my belt and we'll travel."

"Where to?" she asked, hurtling through the air much faster than she had ever gone on foot.

"Baby Two--that is, Lifecraft Number Two--my crash assignment. Good thing I was down here in the Middle; I'd never have made it from up Top. Next corridor left, I think." Then, as the light of his headlamp showed numbers on the wall: "Yes. Square left. I'll swing you."

He swung her and they shot to the end of the passage. He kicked a lever and the lifecraft's port swung open--to reveal a blaze of light and a startled, gray-haired man.

"What happened.... What hap ...?" the man began.

"Wrecked. We've had it. We're abandoning ship. Get into that cubby over there, shut the door tight behind you, and stay there!"

"But can't I do something to help?"

"Without a suit and not knowing how to use one? You'd get burned to a cinder. Get in there--and jump!"

The oldster jumped and Deston turned to his wife. "Stay here at the port, Bobby. Wrap one leg around that lever, to anchor you. What does your telltale read? That gauge there--your radiation meter. It reads twenty, same as mine. Just pink, so we've got a minute or so. I'll roust out some passengers and toss 'em to you--you toss 'em along in there. Can do?"

She was white and trembling; she was very evidently on the verge of being violently sick; but she was far from being out of control. "Can do, sir."

"Good girl, sweetheart. Hang on one minute more and we'll have gravity and you'll be O. K."

The first five doors he tried were locked; and, since they were made of armor plate, there was nothing he could do about them except give each one a resounding kick with a heavy steel boot. The sixth was unlocked, but the passengers--a man and a woman--were very evidently and very gruesomely dead.

So was everyone else he could find until he came to a room in which a man in a spacesuit was floundering helplessly in the air. He glanced at his telltale. Thirty-two. High in the red, almost against the pin.

"Bobby! What do you read?"

"Twenty-six."

"Good. I've found only one, but we're running out of time. I'm coming in."
In the lifecraft he closed the port and slammed on full drive away from the ship. Then, wheeling, he shucked Barbara out of her suit like an ear of corn and shed his own. He picked up a fire-extinguisher-like affair and jerked open the door of a room a little larger than a clothes closet. "Jump in here!" He slammed the door shut. "Now strip, quick!" He picked the canister up and twisted four valves.

Before he could get the gun into working position she was out of her pajamas—the fact that she had been wondering visibly what it was all about had done nothing whatever to cut down her speed. A flood of thick, creamy foam almost hid her from sight and Deston began to talk—quietly.

"Thanks, sweetheart, for not slowing us down by arguing and wanting explanations. This stuff is DEKON—short for Decontaminant, Complete; Compound, Adsorbent, and Chelating, Type DCQ-429.' Used soon enough, it takes care of radiation. Rub it in good, all over you—like this." He set the foam-gun down on the floor and went vigorously to work. "Yes, hair, too. Every square millimeter of skin and mucous membrane. Yes, into your eyes. It stings 'em a little, but that's a lot better than going blind. And your mouth. Swallow six good big mouthfuls—it's tasteless and goes down easy.

"Now the soles of your feet--O. K. The last will hurt plenty, but we've got to get some of it into your lungs and we can't do it the hospital way. So when I slap a gob of it over your mouth and nose inhale hard and deep. Just once is all anybody can do, but that's enough. And don't fight. Any ordinary woman I could handle, but I can't handle you fast enough. So if you don't inhale deep I'll have to knock you cold. Otherwise you die of lung cancer. Will do?"

"Will do, sweetheart. Good and deep. No fight," and she emptied her lungs.

He slapped it on. She inhaled, good and deep; and went into convulsive paroxysms of coughing. He held her in his arms until the worst of it was over; but she was still coughing hard when she pulled herself away from him.

"But ... how ... about ... you?" She could just barely talk; her voice was distorted, almost inaudible. "Let ... me ... help ... you ... quick!"

"No need, darling. Two other men out there. The old man probably won't need it—I think I got him into the safe quick enough—the other guy and I will help each other. So lie down there on the bunk and take it easy until I come back here and help you get the gumkum off. So-long for half an hour, pet."

Forty-five minutes later, while all four were still cleaning up the messes of foam, something began to buzz sharply. Deston stepped over to the board and flipped a switch. The communicator came on. Since everything aboard a starship is designed to fail safe, they were, of course, in normal space. On the visiplates hundreds of stars blazed in vari-colored points of hard, bright light.

"Baby Two acknowledging," Deston said. "First Officer Deston and three passengers. Deconned to zero. Report, please."

"Baby Three. Second Officer Jones and four passengers. Deconned to-----"

"Thank God, Herc!" Formality vanished. "With you to astrogate us, we may have a chance. But how'd you make it? I'd've sworn a flying saucer couldn't've got down from the Top in the time we had."

"Same thing right back at you, Babe. I didn't have to come down. We were in Baby Three when it happened."

"Huh? How come? And who's we?"

"My wife and I." Second Officer Theodore "Hercules" Jones was somewhat embarrassed. "I got married, too, day before yesterday. After the way the old man chewed you out, though, I knew he'd slap irons on me without saying a word, so we kept it dark and hid out in Baby Three. These three are all we could find before our meters went high red. I deconned Bun, then-----"

"Bun?" Barbara broke in. "Bernice Burns? How wonderful!"

"Formerly Bernice Burns. The face of a platinum-blonde beauty appeared on the screen beside Jones'. "And am I glad to see you, Barbara, even if I did just meet you yesterday! I didn't know whether I'd ever see another girl's face or not!"

"Let's cut the chat," Deston said then. "Herc, give me course, blast, and time for rendezvous ... hey! My watch stopped!"

"So did mine," Jones said. "So just hold one gravity on eighteen dash forty-seven dash two seventy-one and I'll correct you as necessary."

After setting course, and still thinking of his watch, Deston said; "But it's nonmagnetic. It never stopped before."

The gray-haired man spoke. "It was never in such a field before. You see, those two observations of fact invalidate twenty-four of the thirty-eight best theories of hyper-space. But tell me—am I correct in saying that none of you were in direct contact with the metal of the ship when it happened?"

"We avoid it in case of trouble. You? Name and job?" Deston jerked his head at the younger stranger.
"I know that much. Henry Newman. Crew-chief, normal space jobs, unlimited."

"Your passengers, Herc?"

"Vincent Lopresto, financier, and his two bodyguards. They were sleeping in their suits, on air-mattresses. Grounders. Don't like subspace—or space, either."

"Just so." The gray-haired man nodded, almost happily. "We survivors, then, absorbed the charge gradually-----"

"But what the-----" Deston began.

"One moment, please, young man. You perhaps saw some of the bodies. What were they like?"

"They looked ... well, not exactly as though they had exploded, but-----" he paused.

"Precisely." Gray-Hair beamed. "That eliminates all the others except three--Morton's, Sebring's, and Rothstein's."

"You're a specialist in subspace, then?"

"Oh, no, I'm not a specialist at all. I'm a dabbler, really. A specialist, you know, is one who learns more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing at all. I'm just the opposite. I'm learning less and less about more and more; hoping in time to know nothing at all about everything."

"In other words, a Fellow of the College. I'm glad you're aboard, sir."

"Oh, a Theoretician?" Barbara's face lit up and she held out her hand. "With dozens of doctorates in everything from Astronomy to Zoology? I've never met ... I'm ever so glad to meet you, Doctor-----?"

"Adams. Andrew Adams. But I have only eight at the moment. Earned degrees, that is."

"But what were you doing in this lifecraft? No, let me guess. You were X-ray-eyeing it and fine-toothed it for improvements made since your last trip, and storing the details away in your eidetic memory."

"Not eidetic, by any means. Merely very good."

"And how many metric tons of apparatus have you got in the hold?" Deston asked.

"Less than six. Just what I must have in order to-----"

"Babe!" Jones' voice cut in. "Course change. Stay on alpha eighteen. Shift beta to forty-four and gamma to two sixty-five."

* * * * *

Rendezvous was made. Both lifecraft hung motionless relative to the Procyon's hulk. No other lifecraft had escaped. A conference was held.

Weeks of work would be necessary before Deston and Jones could learn even approximately what the damage to the Procyon had been. Decontamination was automatic, of course, but there would be literally hundreds of hot spots, each of which would have to be sought out and neutralized by hand. The passengers' effects would have to be listed and stored in the proper cabins. Each body would have to be given velocity away from the ship. And so on. Every survivor would have to work, and work hard.

The two girls wanted to be together. The two officers almost had to be together, to discuss matters at unhampered length and to make decisions. Each was, of course, almost as well versed in engineering as he was in his own specialty. All ships' officers from First to Fifth had to be. And, as long as they lived or until the Procyon made port, all responsibility rested: First, upon First Officer Deston; and second, upon Second Officer Jones. Therefore Theodore and Bernice Jones came aboard Lifecraft Two, and Deston asked Newman to flit across to Lifecraft Three.

"Not me; I like the scenery here better." Newman's eyes raked Bernice's five-feet-eight of scantily-clad sheer beauty from ankles to coiffure. "If you're too crowded--I know a lifecraft carries only fifty people--go yourself.

"As a crew-chief, you know the law." Deston spoke quietly--too quietly, as the other man should have known.

"I am in command."

"You ain't in command of me, pretty boy!" Newman sneered. "You can play God when you're on sked, with a ship-full of trained dogs to bite for you, but out here where nobody has ever come back from I make my own law--with this!" He patted his side pocket.

"Draw it, then!" Deston's voice now had all the top-deck rasp of his rank. "Or crawl!"

The First Officer had not moved; his right hand still hung quietly at his side. Newman glanced at the girls, both of whom were frozen; at Jones, who smiled at him pityingly; at Adams, who was merely interested. "I ... my ... yours is right where you can get at it," he faltered.

"You should have thought of that sooner. But, this once, I won't move a finger until your hand is in your pocket."

"Just wing him, Babe," Jones said then. "He looks strong enough, except for his head. We can use him to shovel out the gunkum and clean up."

"Uh-uh. I'll have to kill him sometime, and the sooner the better. Square between the eyes. Do you want a hundred limit at ten bucks a millimeter on how far the hole is off dead center?"
The two girls gasped; stared at each other and at the two officers in horror; but Jones said calmly, without losing any part of his smile: "I don't want a dime's worth of that. I've lost too much money that way already." At which outrageous statement both girls knew what was going on and smiled in relief.

And Newman misinterpreted those smiles completely; especially Bernice's. The words came hard, but he managed to say then, "I crawl."

"Crawl, what?"
"I crawl, sir. You'll want my gun----"
"Keep it. There's a lot more difference than that between us. How close can you count seconds?"
"Plus or minus five per cent, sir."
"Close enough. Your first job will be to build some kind of a brute-force, belt-or-gear thing to act as a clock. You will really work. Any more insubordination or any malingering at all and I'll put you into a lifecraft and launch you into space, where you can make your own laws and be monarch of all you survey. Dismissed! Now--flit!"

* * * * *

Newman flitted--fast--and Barbara, turning to her husband, opened her mouth to speak and shut it. No, he would have killed the man; he would have had to. He still might have to. Wherefore she said instead: "Why'd you let him keep his pistol? The ... the slime! And after you actually saved his life, too!"

"With some people what's past doesn't count. The other was just a gesture. Psychology. It'll slow him down, I think. Besides, he'd have another one as soon as we get back into the Procyon."

"But you can lock up all their guns, can't you?" Bernice asked.

"I'm afraid not. How about the other three, Herc?"

"With thanks to you, Barbara, for the word; slime. If Lopresto is a financier, I'm an angel, with wings and halo complete. Gangsters; hoodlums; racketeers; you'd have to open every can of concentrate aboard to find all their spare artillery."

"Check. The first thing to do is----"

"One word first," Bernice put in. "I want to thank you, First Off--no, not First Officer, but I could hardly----"

"Sure you can. I'm 'Babe' to us all, and you're 'Bun'. As to the other, forget it. You and I, Herc, will go over and----"

"And I," Adams put in, definitely. "I must photograph everything, before it is touched; therefore I must be the first on board. I must do some autopsies and also----"

"Of course. You're right," Deston said. "And if I haven't said it before, I'm tremendously glad to have a Big Brain along ... oh, excuse that crack, please, Dr. Adams. It slipped out on me."

Adams laughed. "In context, I regard that as the highest compliment I have ever received. To you youngsters my advanced age of fifty-two represents senility. Nevertheless, you men need not 'Doctor' me. Either 'Adams' or 'Andy' will do very nicely. As for you two young women----"

"I'm going to call you 'Uncle Andy',' Barbara said, with a grin. "Now, Uncle Andy, you being a Big Brain--the term being used in its most complimentary sense--and the way you talked, one of your eight doctorates is in medicine."

"Of course."

"Are you any good at obstetrics?"

"In the present instance I am perfectly safe in saying----"

"Wait a minute!" Deston snapped. "Bobby, you are not----"

"I am too! That is, I don't suppose I am yet, since we were married only last Tuesday, but if he's competent--and I'm sure he is--I'm certainly going to! If we get back to Earth I want to, and if we don't, both Bun and I have got to. Castaways' Code, you know. So how about it, Uncle Andy?"

"I know what you two girls are," Adams said, quietly. "I know what you two men must of necessity be. Therefore I can say without reservation that none of you need feel any apprehension whatever."

Deston was about to say something, but Barbara forestalled him. "Well, we can think about it, anyway, and talk it over. But for right now, I think it's high time we all got some sleep. Don't you?"

* * * * *

It was; and they did; and after they had slept and had eaten "breakfast" the three men wafted themselves across a couple of hundred yards of space to the crippled starship. Powerful floodlights were rigged.

"What ... a ... mess." Deston's voice was low and wondering. "The whole Top looks as though she'd crash-landed and spun out for eight miles. But the Middle and Tail look untouched."

Inside, however, devastation had gone deep into the Middle. Bulkheads, walls, floors, structural members; were torn, sheared, twisted into weirdly-distorted shapes impossible to understand or explain. And, much worse, were the absences; for in dozens of volumes, of as many sizes and of shapes incompatible with any three-dimensional
geometry, every solid thing had vanished—without leaving any clue whatever as to where or how it had gone.

After three long days of hard work, Adams was satisfied. He had taken pictures as fast as both officers could process the film; he had covered many miles of tape with words only half of which either spaceman could understand. Then, finally, he said:

"Well, that covers the preliminary observations as well as I know how to do it. Thank you, boys, for your forbearance and your help. Now, if you'll help me find my stuff and bring some of it—a computer and so on—up to the lounge?" They did so; the "and so on" proving to be a bewildering miscellany indeed. "Thank you immensely, gentlemen; now I won't bother you any more."

"You've learned a lot, Doc, and we haven't learned much of anything." Deston grinned ruefully. "That makes you the director. You'll have to tell us, in general terms, what to do."

"Oh! I can offer a few suggestions. It is virtually certain: One, that no subspace equipment will function. Two, that all normal-space equipment, except for some items you know about, will function normally. Three, that we can't do anything about subspace without landing on a planet. Four, that such landing will require extreme—I might almost say fantastic—precautions."

Although both officers thought that they understood Item Four, neither of them had any inkling as to what Adams really meant. They did understand thoroughly, however, Items One, Two, and Three.

"Hell's jets!" Deston exclaimed. "Do you mean we'll have to blast normal to a system?"

"It isn't as bad as you think, Babe," Jones said. "Stars are much thicker here—we're in the center somewhere—than around Sol. The probability is point nine plus that any emergence would put us less than point four light-years away from a star. A couple of them show disks. I haven't measured any yet; have you, Doc?"

"Yes. Point two two, approximately, to the closest."

"So what?" Deston demanded. "What's the chance of it having an Earth-type planet?"

"Any solid planet will do," Adams said. "Just so it has plenty of mass."

"That's still quite a trip." Deston was coming around. "Especially since we can't use more than one point-----"

"One point zero gravities," Jones put in.

"Over the long pull—and the women—you're right," Deston agreed, and took out his slide rule. "Let's see ... one gravity, plus and minus ... velocity ... time ... it'll take about eleven months?"

"Just about," Jones agreed, and Adams nodded.

"Well, if that's what the cards say, there's no use yowling about it," and all nine survivors went to work.

Deston, besides working, directed the activities of all the others except Adams; who worked harder and longer than did anyone else. He barely took time out to eat and to sleep. Nor did either Deston or Jones ask him what he was doing. Both knew that it would take five years of advanced study before either of them could understand the simplest material on the doctor's tapes.

III.

The tremendous engines of the Procyon were again putting out their wonted torrents of power. The starship, now a mere spaceship, was on course at one gravity. The lifecraft were in their slots, but the five and the four still lived in them rather than in the vast and oppressive emptiness that the ship itself now was. And socially, outside of working hours, the two groups did not mix.

Clean-up was going nicely, at the union rate of six hours on and eighteen hours off. Deston could have set any hours he pleased, but he didn't. There was plenty of time. Eleven months in deep space is a fearfully, a tremendously long time.

"Morning," "afternoon," "evening," and "night" were, of course, purely conventional terms. The twenty-four-hour "day" measured off by the brute-force machine that was their masterclock carried no guarantee, expressed or implied, as to either accuracy or uniformity.

One evening, then, four hard-faced men sat at two small tables in the main room of Lifecraft Three. Two of them, Ferdy Blaine and Moose Mordan, were playing cards for small stakes. Ferdy was of medium size; compact rather than slender; built of rawhide and spring steel. Lithe and poised, he was the epitome of leashed and controlled action. Moose was six-feet-four and weighed a good two-forty—stolid, massive, solid. Ferdy and Moose; a tiger and an elephant; both owned in fee simple by Vincent Lopresto.

The two at the other table had been planning for days. They had had many vitriolic arguments, but neither had made any motion toward his weapon.

"Play it my way and we've got it made, I tell you!" Newman pounded the table with his fist. "Seventy million if it's a cent! Heavier grease than your lousy spig Syndicate ever even heard of! I'm as good an astrogator as Jones is, and a damn sight better engineer. In electronics I maybe ain't got the theory Pretty Boy has, but at building and repairing the stuff I've forgot more than he ever will know. At practical stuff, and that's all we give a whoop about, I lay over both them sissies like a Lunar dome."
“Oh, yeah?” Lopresto sneered. “How come you aren't ticketed for subspace, then?”

“For hell's sake, act your age!” Newman snorted in disgust. Eyes locked and held, but nothing happened. “D'ya think I'm dumb? Or that them subspace Boy Scouts can be fixed? Or I don't know where the heavy grease is at? Or I can't make the approach? Why ain't you in subspace?”

“I see.” Lopresto forced his anger down. "But I've got to be sure we can get back without 'em."

"You can be damn sure. I got to get back myself, don't I? But get one thing down solid. I get the big peroxide blonde."

"You can have her. Too big. I like the little yellowhead a lot better."

Newman sneered into the hard-held face so close to his and said: "And don't think for a second you can make me crawl, you small-time, chiseling punk. Rub me out after we kill them off and you get nowhere. You're dead. Chew on that a while, and you'll know who's boss."

After just the right amount of holding back and objecting, Lopresto agreed. "You win, Newman, the way the cards lay. Have you ever planned this kind of an operation or do you want me to?"

"You do it, Vince,” Newman said, grandly. He had at least one of the qualities of a leader. "Besides, you already have, ain't you?"

"Of course. Ferdy will take Deston----" "No he won't! He's mine, the louse!"

"If you're that dumb, all bets are off. What are you using for a brain? Can't you see the guy's chain lightning on ball bearings?"

"But we're going to surprise 'em, ain't we?"

"Sure, but even Ferdy would just as soon not give him an even break. You wouldn't stand the chance of a snowflake in hell, and if you've got the brains of a louse you know it."

"O.K., we'll let Ferdy have him. Me and you will match draws to see who----"

"I can draw twice to your once, but I suppose I'll have to prove it to you. I'll take Jones; you will gun the professor; Moose will grab the dames, one under each arm, and keep 'em out of the way until the shooting's over. The only thing is, when? The sooner the better. Tomorrow?"

"Not quite, Vince. Let 'em finish figuring course, time, distance, all that stuff. They can do it a lot faster and some better than I can. I'll tell you when."

"O.K., and I'll give the signal. When I yell 'NOW' we give 'em the business."

Newman went to his cabin and the muscle called Moose spoke thoughtfully. That is, as nearly thoughtfully as his mental equipment would allow.

"I don't like that ape, boss. Before you gun him, let me work him over just a little bit, huh?"

"It'll be quite a while yet, but that's a promise, Moose. As soon as his job's done he'll wish he'd never been born. Until then, we'll let him think he's Top Dog. Let him rave. But Ferdy, any time he's behind me or out of sight, watch him like a hawk. Shoot him through the right elbow if he makes one sour move."

"I get you, boss."

* * * * *

A couple of evenings later, in Lifecraft Two, Barbara said: "You're worried, Babe, and everything's going so smoothly. Why?"

"Too smoothly altogether. That's why. Newman ought to be doing a slow burn and goldbricking all he dares; instead of which he's happy as a clam and working like a nailer ... and I wouldn't trust Vincent Lopresto or Ferdinand Blaine as far as I can throw a brick chimney by its smoke. This whole situation stinks. There's going to be shooting for sure."

"But they couldn't do anything without you two!” Bernice exclaimed. "It'd be suicide ... and with no motive ... could they, Ted, possibly?"

Jones' dark face did not lighten. "They could, and I'm very much afraid they intend to. As a crew-chief, Newman is a jack-leg engineer and a very good practical 'troncist; and if he's what I think he is----" He paused.

"Could be," Deston said, doubtfully. "In with a mob of normal-space pirate-smugglers. I'll buy that, but there wouldn't be enough plunder to----"

"Just a sec. So he's a pretty good rule-of-thumb astrogator, too, and we're computing every element of the flight. As for motive--salvage. With either of us alive, none. With both of us dead, can you guess within ten million bucks of how much they'll collect?"

"Blockhead!” Deston slapped himself on the forehead. "I never even thought of that angle. That nails it down solid."

"With the added attraction," Jones went on, coldly and steadily, "of having two extremely desirable female women for eleven months before killing them, too."
Both girls shrank visibly, and Deston said: "Check. I thought that was the main feature, but it didn't add up. This does. Now, how will they figure the battle? Both of us at once, of----"

"Why?" Barbara asked. "I'd think they'd waylay you, one at a time."

"Uh-uh. The survivor would lock the ship in null-G and it'd be like shooting fish in a barrel. Since we're almost never together on duty ... and it won't come until after we've finished the computations ... they'll think up a good reason for everybody to be together, and that itself will be the tip-off. Ferdy will probably draw on me-----"

"And he'll kill you," Jones said, flatly. "So I think I'll blow his brains out tomorrow morning on sight."

"And get killed yourself? No ... much better to use their own trap-----"

"We can't! Fast as you are, you aren't in his class. He's a professional--probably one of the fastest guns in space."

"Yes, but ... I've got a ... I mean I think I can-----"

Bernice, grinning openly now, stopped Deston's floundering. "It's high time you fellows told each other the truth. Bobby and I let our back hair down long ago--we were both tremendously surprised to know that both you boys are just as strongly psychic as we are. Perhaps even more so."

"Oh ... so you get hunches, too?" Jones demanded. "So you'll have plenty of warning?"

"All my life. The old alarm clock has never failed me yet. But the girls can't start packing pistols now."

"I wouldn't know how to shoot one if I did," Bernice laughed. "I'll throw things I'm very good at that."

"Huh?" Jones asked. He didn't know his new wife very well, either. "What can you throw straight enough to do any good?"

"Anything I can reach," she replied, confidently. "Baseballs, medicine balls, cannon balls, rocks, bricks, darts, discus, hammer, javelin--what-have-you. In a for-real battle I'd prefer ... chairs, I think. Flying chairs are really hard to cope with. Knives are too ... uh-uh, I'd much rather have you fellows do the actual executing. I'll start wearing a couple of knives in leg-sheaths, but I won't throw 'em or use 'em unless I absolutely have to. So who will I knock out with the first chair?"

"I'll answer that," Barbara said, quietly. "If it's Blaine against Babe, it'll be Lopresto against Herc. So you'll throw your chairs or whatever at that unspeakable oaf Newman."

"I'd rather brain him than anyone else I know, but that would leave that gigantic gorilla to ... why, he'd ... listen, you'll simply have to go armed."

"I always do." Barbara held out her hands. "Since they don't want to shoot us two--yet--these are all the weapons I'll need."

"Against a man-mountain like that? You're that good? Really?"

"Especially against a man-mountain like that. I'm that good. Really," and both Joneses began to realize what Deston already knew--just how deadly those harmless-seeming weapons could be.

Barbara went on: "We should have a signal, in case one of us gets warning first. Something that wouldn't mean anything to them ... musical, say ... Brahms. That's it. The very instant any one of us feels their intent to signal their attack he yells 'BRAHMS!' and we all beat them to the punch. O. K.?"

It was O. K., and the four--Adams was still hard at work in the lounge--went to bed.

* * * * *

And three days later, within an hour after the last flight-datum had been "put in the tank," the four intended victims allowed themselves to be inveigled into the lounge. Everything was peaceful; everyone was full of friendship and brotherly love. But suddenly "BRAHMS!" rang out, with four voices in absolute unison; followed a moment later by Lopresto's stentorian "NOW!"

It was a very good thing that Deston had had ample warning, for he was indeed competing out of his class. As it was, his bullet crashed through Blaine's head, while the gunman's went harmlessly into the carpet. The other pistol duel wasn't even close! Lopresto's hand barely touched his gun.

Bernice, even while shrieking the battle-cry, leaped to her feet, hurled her chair, and reached for another; but one chair was enough. That fiercely but accurately-spied missile knocked the half-drawn pistol from Newman's hand and sent his body crashing to the floor, where Deston's second bullet made it certain that he would not recover consciousness.

Barbara's hand-to-hand engagement took about one second longer. Moose Mordan was big and strong; and, for such a big man, was fairly fast physically. If he had had time to get his muscles ready, he might have had a chance. His thought processes, however, were lamentably slow; and Barbara Warner Deston was almost as fast physically as she was mentally. Thus she reached him before he even began to realize that this pint-sized girl actually intended to hit him; and thus it was that his belly-muscles were still completely relaxed when her small but extremely hard left fist sank half-forearm-deep into his solar plexus.

With an agonized "WHOOSH!" he began to double up, but she scarcely allowed him to bend. Her right hand,
fingers tightly bunched, was already boring savagely into a selected spot at the base of his neck. Then, left hand at
his throat and right hand pulling hard at his belt, she put the totalized and concentrated power of her whole body
behind the knee she drove into his groin.

That ended it. The big man could very well have been dying on his feet. To make sure, however—or to keep the
girl from knowing that she had killed a man?—Deston and Jones each put a bullet through the falling head before it
struck the rug.

Both girls flung themselves, sobbing, into their husband's arms.

The whole battle had lasted only a few seconds. Adams, although he had seen almost everything, had been
concentrating so deeply that it took those few seconds for him actually to realize what was going on. He got up,
felt[2] of Newman's head, then looked casually at the three other bodies.


"Oh, I killed him, Carl!" Barbara sobbed, convulsively. "And the worst of it is, I really meant to! I never did
anything like that before in my whole life!"

"You didn't kill him, Barbara," Adams said.

"Huh?" She raised her head from Deston's shoulder; the contrast between her streaming eyes and the relief
dawning over her whole face was almost funny. "Why, I did the foulest things possible, and as hard as I possibly
could. I'm sure I killed him."

"By no means, my dear. Judo techniques, however skillfully and powerfully applied, do not and can not kill
instantly. Bullets through the brain do. I will photograph the cadavers, of course, and perform the customary post-
mortem examinations for the record; but I know already what the findings will be. These four men died instantly of
gunshot wounds."

* * * * *

With the four gangsters gone, life aboardship settled down quickly into a routine. That routine, however, was in
no sense dull. The officers had plenty to do; operating the whole ship and rebuilding the mechanisms that were
operating on jury rigging or on straight "bread-board" hookups. And in their "spare" time they enjoyed themselves
tremendously in becoming better and better acquainted with their wives. For Bernice and Jones, like Barbara and
Deston, had for each other an infinite number of endless vistas of personality; the exploration of which was sheerest
delight.

The girls--each of whom became joyously pregnant as soon as she could--kept house and helped their husbands
whenever need or opportunity arose. Their biggest chore, however, was to see to it that Adams got sleep, food, and
exercise. For, if left to his own devices, he would never have exercised at all, would have grabbed a bite now and
then, and would have slept only when he could no longer stay awake.

"Uncle Andy, why don't you use that Big Brain of yours?" Barbara snapped at him one day. "For a man that's
actually as smart as you are, I swear you've got the least sense of anybody I know!"

"But it's necessary, my dear child," Adams explained, unmoved. "This material is new. There are many
extremely difficult problems involved, and I have less than a year to work on them. Less than one year; and it is a
task for a team of specialists and all the resources of a research center."

To the officers, however, Adams went into more detail. "Considering the enormous amounts of supplies
carried; the scope, quantity, and quality of the safety devices employed; it is improbable that we are the first
survivors of a subspace catastrophe to set course for a planet."

After some argument, the officers agreed.

"While I cannot as yet detect it, classify it, or evaluate it, we are carrying an extremely heavy charge of an
unknown nature; the residuum of a field of force which is possibly more or less analogous to the electromagnetic
field. This residuum either is or is not dischargeable to an object of planetary mass; and I'm virtually certain that it
is. The discharge may be anything from an imperceptible flow up to one of such violence as to volatilize the craft
carrying it. From the facts: One, that in the absence of that field the subspace radio will function normally; and Two,
that no subspace-radio messages have ever been received from survivors; the conclusion seems inescapable that the
discharge of this unknown field is in fact of extreme violence."

"Good God!" Deston exclaimed. "Oh ... that was what you meant by 'fantastic precautions,' back there?"

"Precisely."

"But what can we do about it?"

"I don't know. I ... simply ... do ... not ... know." Adams lost himself in thought for over a minute. "This is all so
new ... I know so little ... and am working with such pitifully inadequate instrumentation—However, we have months
of time yet, and if I am unable to arrive at a conclusion before arrival—I don't mean a rigorous analysis, of course,
but merely a stop-gap, empirical, pragmatic solution—we will simply remain in orbit around that sun until I do."

IV.
The Procyon bored on through space, at one unchanging gravity of acceleration. It may not seem, at first
glance, that one gravity would result in any very high velocity; but when it is maintained steadily for days and weeks
and months, it builds up to a very respectable speed. Nor was there any question of power, for the Procyon's atomics
did not drive the ship, but merely energized the "Chaytors"--the Chaytor Effect engines that tapped the energy of the
expanding universe itself.

Thus, in less than six months, the Procyon had attained a velocity almost half that of light. At the estimated
mid-point of the flight the spaceship, still at one gravity of drive, was turned end-for-end; so that for the ensuing
five-and-a-fraction months she would be slowing down.

A few weeks after the turnover, Adams seemed to have more time. At least, he devoted more time to the
expectant mothers, even to the point of supervising Deston and Jones in the construction of a weirdly-wired device
by means of which he studied and photographed the unborn child each woman bore. He said nothing, however, until
Barbara made him talk.

"Listen, you egregious clam," she said, firmly, "I know darn well I've been pregnant for at least seven months,
and I ought to be twice this big. Our clock isn't that far off; Carl said that by wave lengths or something it's only
about three per cent fast. And you've been pussyfooting and hem-hawing around all this time. Now, Uncle Andy, I
want the truth. Are we in for a lot of trouble?"

"Trouble? Of course not. Certainly not. No trouble at all, my dear. Why, you've seen the pictures--here, look at
them again ... see? Absolutely normal fetus--yours, too, Bernice. Perfect! No malformations of any kind."

"Yes, but for what age?" Bernice asked, pointedly. "Four months, say? I see, I was exposed to a course in
embryology myself, once."

"But that's the interesting part of it!" Adams enthused. "Fascinating! And, indubitably, supremely important. In
fact, it may point out the key datum underlying the solution of our entire problem. If this zeta field is causing this
seemingly peculiar biological effect, that gives us a tremendously powerful new tool, for certain time vectors in the
generalized matrix become parameters. Thus, certain determinants, notably the all-important delta-prime-sub-mu,
become manipulable by ... but you aren't listening!"

"I'm listening, pops, but nothing is coming through. But thanks much, anyway. I feel a lot better, knowing I'm
not going to give birth to a monster. Or are you sure, really?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Adams snapped, testily, and Barbara led Deston aside.

"Have you got the slightest idea of what he was talking about?" she asked.

"Just the slightest, if any. Either that time is relative--no, that's so elementary he wouldn't mention it. Maybe
he's figured out a variable time of some kind or other. Anyway, you girls' slowness in producing has given the old
boy a big lift, and I'm mighty glad of it."

"But aren't you worried, sweetheart? Not even the least little bit?"

"Of course not," and Deston very evidently meant just that.

"I am. I can't help but be. Why aren't you?"

"Because Doc isn't, and he knows his stuff, believe me. He can't lie any better than a three-year-old, and he's
sure that all four of you are just as safe as though you were in God's lefthand hip pocket."

"Oh--that's right. I never thought of it that way. So I don't have anything to worry about, do I?" She lifted her
lips to be kissed; and the kiss was long and sweet.

* * * *

Time flew past until, one day a couple of weeks short of arrival, Adams rushed up to Deston and Jones. "I have
it!" he shouted, and began to spout a torrent of higher--very much higher--mathematics.

"Hold it, Doc!" Deston held up an expostulatory hand. "I read you zero and ten. Can't you delouse your signal?
Whittle the stuff down to our size?"

"W-e-l-l-,

"The discharge is catastrophic; in energy equivalent something of the order of magnitude of ten thousand discharges of lightning. And, unfortunately, I
do not know what it is. It is virtually certain, however, that we will be able to dissipate it in successive decrements
by the use of long, thin leads extending downward toward a high point of the planet."

"Wire, you mean? What kind?"

"The material is not important except in that it should have sufficient tensile strength to support as many miles
as possible of its own length."

"We've got dozens of coils of hook-up wire," Deston said, "but not too many miles and it's soft stuff."

"Graham wire!" Jones snapped his finger.

"Of course," Deston agreed. "Hundreds of miles of it. Float the senser down on a Hotchkiss--"

"Tear-out." Jones objected.

"Bailey it--spidered out to twenty or so big, flat feet. That'll take metal, but we can cannibal the whole Middle
without weakening the structure."

"Sure ... surges--backlash. Remote it."

"Check. Remote everything to Baby Two, and----"

"Would you mind delousing your signal?" Adams asked, caustically.

"Scuse, please, Doc. A guy does talk better in his own lingo, doesn't he? Well, Graham wire is one-point-three-millimeter-diameter, ultra-high-tensile steel wire. Used for re-wrapping the Grahams, you know."

"No, I don't know. What are Grahams?"

"Why, they're the intermediates between the Chaytors ... O. K., O. K., they're something like bottles, that have to stand terrifically high pressures."

"That's what I want to know. Such wire will do very nicely. Note now that our bodies must be grounded very thoroughly to the metal of the ship."

"You're so right. We'll wrap the girls in silver-mesh underwear up to the eyeballs, and run leads as big as my wrist to the frame."

* * * * *

The approach was made, and the fourth planet out from that strange sun was selected as a ground. That planet was not at all like Earth. It had very little water, very little atmosphere, and very little vegetation. It was twice as massive as Earth; its surface was rugged and jagged; one of its stupendous mountain ranges had sharp peaks more than forty thousand feet high.

"There's one thing more we must do," Adams said. "I have barely begun to study this zeta field, and this one may very well be unique--irreplaceable. We must, therefore, launch all the lifecraft--except Number Two, of course--into separate orbits around this sun, so that a properly-staffed and properly-equipped expedition can study it."

"Your proper expedition might get its pants burned off, too."

"There is always that possibility; but I will insist on being assigned to the project. This information, young man, is necessary."

"O. K., Doc," and it was done; and in a few days the Procyon hung motionless, a good five hundred miles high, directly above the highest, sharpest mountain peak they had been able to find.

The Bailey boom, with its spider-web-like network of grounding cables and with a large pulley at its end, extended two hundred feet straight out from the side of the ship. A twenty-five-mile coil of Graham wire was mounted on the remote-controlled Hotchkiss reel. The end of the wire was run out over the pulley; a fifteen-pound weight, to act both as a "senser" and to keep the wire from fouling, was attached; and a few hundred feet of wire were run out.

Then, in Lifecraft Two--as far away from the "business district" as they could get--the human bodies were grounded and Deston started the reel. The wire ran out--and ran--and ran--and ran. The full twenty-five miles were paid out, and still nothing happened. Then, very slowly, Deston let the big ship move straight downward. Until, finally, it happened.

There was a blast beside which the most terrific flash of lightning ever seen on Earth would have seemed like a firecracker. In what was almost a vacuum though she was, the whole immense mass of the Procyon was hurled upward like the cork out of a champagne bottle. And as for what it felt like--since the five who experienced it could never describe it, even to each other, it is obviously indescribable by or to anyone else. As Bernice said long afterward, when she was being pressed by a newsman: "Just tell 'em it was the living end," and that is as good a description as any.

The girls were unwrapped from their silver-mesh cocoons and, after a minute or so of semihysterics, were as good as new. Then Deston stared into the 'scope and gulped. Without saying a word he waved a hand and the others looked. It seemed as though the entire tip of the mountain was gone; had become a seething, flaming volcano on a world that had known no volcanism for hundreds of thousands of years.

"And what," said Deston finally, "do you suppose happened to the other side of the ship?"

The boom, of course, was gone. So were about twenty of the grounding cables which, each the size of a man's arm, had fanned out in all directions to anchorages welded solidly to the vessel's skin and frame. The anchorages, too, were gone; and tons upon tons of high-alloy steel plating and structural members for many feet around where each anchorage had been. Steel had run like water; had been blown away in gusts of vapor.

"Shall I try the radio now, Doc?" Deston asked.

"By no means. This first blast would, of course, be the worst, but there will be several more, of decreasing violence."

* * * * *

There were. The second, while it volatilized the boom and its grounding network, merely fused portions of the anchorages. The third took only the boom itself; the fourth took only the dangling miles of wire. At the sixth trial
nothing--apparently--happened; whereupon the wire was drawn in and a two-hundred-pound mass of steel was lowered until it was in firm and quiescent contact with the solid rock of the planet.

"Now you may try your radio," Adams said.

Deston flipped a switch and spoke, quietly but clearly, into a microphone. "Procyon One to Control Six. Flight Eight Four Nine. Subspace Radio Test Ninety-Five--I think. How do you read me, Control Six?"

The reply was highly unorthodox. It was a wild yell, followed by words not directed at Deston at all. "Captain Reamer! Captain French! Captain Holloway! ANYBODY! It's the Procyon! The PROCYON, that was lost a year ago! Unless some fool is playing a dumb joke."

"It's no joke--I hope." Another voice, crisp and authoritative, came in; growing louder as its source approached the distant pickup. "Or somebody will rot in jail for a hundred years."

"Procyon One to Control Six," Deston said again. His voice was not quite steady this time; both girls were crying openly and joyfully. "How do you read me, Frenchy old horse?"

"It is Procyon One--the Runt himself--Hi, Babe!" the new voice roared, then quieted to normal volume. "I read you eight and one. Survivors?"

"Five. Second Officer Jones, our wives, and Dr. Andrew Adams, a Fellow of the College of Advanced Study. He's solely responsible for our being here, so----"

"Skip that for now. In a lifecraft? No, after this long, it must be the ship. Not navigable, of course?"

"Not in subspace, and only so-so in normal. The Chaytors are O. K., but the whole Top is spun out and the rest of her won't hold air--air, hell! She won't hold shipping crates! All the Wesleys are shot, and all the Q-converters. Half the Grahams are leaking like sieves, and----"

"Skip that, too. Just a sec--I'll cut in the downstairs recorder. Now start in at your last check and tell us what's happened since."

"It's a long story."

"Unwind it, Runt, I don't give a damn how long it is. Not a full-detailed report, just hit the high spots--but don't leave out anything really important."

"Wow!" Jones remarked, audibly. "Wottaman Frenchy! Like the ex-urbanite said to the gardener: 'I don't want you to work hard--just take big shovelfulls and lots of 'em per minute'!"

"That's enough out of you, Herc my boy. You'll be next. Go ahead, Babe."

Deston went ahead, and spoke almost steadily for thirty minutes. He did not mention the gangsters; nor any personal matters. Otherwise, his report was accurate and complete. He had no idea that everything he said was going out on an Earth-wide hookup; or that many other planets, monitoring constantly all subspace channels, were hooking on. When he was finally released Captain French said, with a chuckle:

"Off the air for a minute. You've no idea what an uproar this has stirred up already. They let them have all your stuff, but we aren't putting out a thing until some Brass gets out there and gets the real story----"

"That is the real story, damn it!"

"Unlist the ex-urbanite. 'I don't want you to work hard--just take big shovelfulls and lots of 'em per minute'; that's what he said to the gardener."

"Off the air--for good, I hope. Don't make me laugh, Buster, Your probable center will spear it. If there's ever more than one star in any confusion you set up, I'll eat all the extras. But there's a dozen Big Brains here, gnawing their nails off up to the wrist to talk to Adams all the rest of the night, so put him on and let's get back to sleep, huh? They're cutting this mike now."

"Just a minute!" Deston snapped. "What's your time?"

"Three, fourteen, thirty-seven. So go back to bed, you night-prowling owl."

"Of what day, month, and year?" Deston insisted.

"Friday, Sep----" French's voice was replaced by a much older one; very evidently that of a Fellow of the College.

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"Oh, sure, and a very nice job, too, for an extemporaneous effort--if it was. Semantics says, though, that in a couple of spots it smells like slightly rancid cheese, and ... no-no, keep still! Too many planets listening in--verbum sap. Anyway, THE PRESS smells something, too, and they're screaming their lungs out, especially the sob-sisters. Now, Herc, on the air, you're orbiting the fourth planet of a sun. What sun? Where?"

"I don't know. Unlisted. We're in completely unexplored territory. Standard reference angles are as follows"--and Jones read off a long list of observations, not only of the brightest stars of the galaxy, but also of the standard reference points, such as S-Doradus, lying outside it. "When you get that stuff all plotted, you'll find a hell of a big confusion; but I hope there aren't enough stars in it but what you can find us sometime.

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Since there was only one star in Jones' "Confusion" (by the book, "Volume of Uncertainty") finding the Procyon was no problem at all. High Brass came in quantity and the entire story--except for one bit of biology--was told. Two huge subspace-going machine shops also came, and a thousand mechanics, who worked on the crippled liner for almost three weeks.

Then the Procyon started back for Earth under her own subspace drive, under the command of Captain Theodore Jones. His first, last, and only subspace command, of course, since he was now a married man. Deston had wanted to resign while still a First Officer, but his superiors would not accept his resignation until his promotion "for outstanding services" came through. Thus, Ex-Captain Carlyle Deston and his wife were dead-heading, not quite back to Earth, but to the transfer-point for the planet Newmars.

"Theodore Warner Deston is going to be born on Newmars, where he should be," Barbara had said, and Deston had agreed.

"But suppose she's Theodora?" Bernice had twitted her.
"Uh-uh," Barbara had said, calmly. "I just know he's Theodore."
"Uh-huh, I know." Bernice had nodded her spectacular head. "And we wanted a girl, so she is. Barbara Bernice Jones, her name is. A living doll."

Although both pregnancies were well advanced, neither was very near full term. Thus it was clear that both periods of gestation were going to be well over a year in length; but none of the five persons who knew it so much as mentioned the fact. To Adams it was only one tiny datum in an incredibly huge and complex mathematical structure. The parents did not want to be pilloried as crackpots, as publicity-seeking liars, or as being unable to count; and they knew that nobody would believe them if they told the truth; even--or especially?--no medical doctor. The more any doctor knew about gynecology and obstetrics, in fact, the less he would believe any such story as theirs.

Of what use is it to pit such puny and trivial things as facts against rock-ribbed, iron-bound, entrenched AUTHORITY?

The five, however, knew; and Deston and Jones had several long and highly unsatisfactory discussions; at first with Adams, and later between themselves. At the end of the last such discussion, a couple of hours out from the transfer point, Jones lit a cigarette savagely and rasped:

"Wherever you start or whatever your angle of approach, he always boils it down to this: 'Subjective time is measured by the number of learning events experienced.' I ask you, Babe, what does that mean? If anything?"

"It sounds like it ought to mean something, but I'll be damned if I know what." Deston gazed thoughtfully at the incandescent tip of his friend's cigarette. "However, if it makes the old boy happy and gives the College a toehold on subspace, what do we care?"

Contents

THE ALIENS
by Murray Leinster

The human race was expanding through the galaxy ... and so, they knew, were the Aliens. When two expanding empires meet ... war is inevitable. Or is it ...?

At 04 hours 10 minutes, ship time, the Niccola was well inside the Theta Gisol solar system. She had previously secured excellent evidence that this was not the home of the Plumie civilization. There was no tuned radiation. There was no evidence of interplanetary travel--rockets would be more than obvious, and a magnetronic drive had a highly characteristic radiation-pattern--so the real purpose of the Niccola's voyage would not be accomplished here. She wouldn't find out where Plumies came from.

There might, though, be one or more of those singular, conical, hollow-topped cairns sheltering silicon-bronze plates, which constituted the evidence that Plumies existed. The Niccola went sunward toward the inner planets to see. Such cairns had been found on conspicuous landmarks on oxygen-type planets over a range of some twelve hundred light-years. By the vegetation about them, some were a century old. On the same evidence, others had been erected only months or weeks or even days before a human Space Survey ship arrived to discover them. And the situation was unpromising. It wasn't likely that the galaxy was big enough to hold two races of rational beings capable of space travel. Back on ancient Earth, a planet had been too small to hold two races with tools and fire. Historically, that problem was settled when Homo sapiens exterminated Homo neanderthalis. It appeared that the
same situation had arisen in space. There were humans, and there were Plumies. Both had interstellar ships. To
humans, the fact was alarming. The need for knowledge, and the danger that Plumies might know more first, and
thereby be able to exterminate humanity, was appalling.

Therefore the Niccola. She drove on sunward. She had left one frozen outer planet far behind. She had crossed
the orbits of three others. The last of these was a gas giant with innumerable moonlets revolving about it. It was now
some thirty millions of miles back and twenty to one side. The sun, ahead, flared and flamed in emptiness against
that expanse of tinted stars.

Jon Baird worked steadily in the Niccola's radar room. He was one of those who hoped that the Plumies would
not prove to be the natural enemies of mankind. Now, it looked like this ship wouldn't find out in this solar system.
There were plenty of other ships on the hunt. From here on, it looked like routine to the next unvisited family of
planets. But meanwhile he worked. Opposite him, Diane Holt worked as steadily, her dark head bent intently over a
radar graph in formation. The immediate job was the completion of a map of the meteor swarms following cometary
orbits about this sun. They interlaced emptiness with hazards to navigation, and nobody would try to drive through a
solar system without such a map.

Elsewhere in the ship, everything was normal. The engine room was a place of stillness and peace, save for the
almost inaudible hum of the drive, running at half a million Gauss flux-density. The skipper did whatever skippers
do when they are invisible to their subordinates. The weapons officer, Taine, thought appropriate thoughts. In the
navigation room the second officer conscientiously glanced at each separate instrument at least once in each five
minutes, and then carefully surveyed all the screens showing space outside the ship. The stewards disposed of the
debris of the last meal, and began to get ready for the next. In the crew's quarters, those off duty read or worked at
scrimshaw, or simply and contentedly loafed.

Diane handed over the transparent radar graph, to be fitted into the three-dimensional map in the making.
"There's a lump of stuff here," she said interestedly. "It could be the comet that once followed this orbit, now so
old it's lost all its gases and isn't a comet any longer."

At this instant, which was 04 hours 25 minutes ship time, the alarm-bell rang. It clanged stridently over Baird's
head, repeater-gongs sounded all through the ship, and there was a scurrying and a closing of doors. The alarm gong
could mean only one thing. It made one's breath come faster or one's hair stand on end, according to temperament.

The skipper's face appeared on the direct-line screen from the navigation room.
"Plumies?" he demanded harshly. "Mr. Baird! Plumies?"

Baird's hands were already flipping switches and plugging the radar room apparatus into a new setup.
"There's a contact, sir," he said curtly. "No. There was a contact. It's broken now. Something detected us. We
picked up a radar pulse. One."

The word "one" meant much. A radar system that could get adequate information from a single pulse was not
the work of amateurs. It was the product of a very highly developed technology. Setting all equipment to full-
globular scanning, Baird felt a certain crawling sensation at the back of his neck. He'd been mapping within a
narrow range above and below the line of this system's ecliptic. A lot could have happened outside the area he'd had
under long-distance scanning.

But seconds passed. They seemed like years. The all-globe scanning covered every direction out from the
Niccola. Nothing appeared which had not been reported before. The gas-giant planet far behind, and the only inner
one on this side of the sun, would return their pulses only after minutes. Meanwhile the radars reported very
faintly, but they only repeated previous reports.

"No new object within half a million miles," said Baird, after a suitable interval. Presently he added: "Nothing
new within three-quarter million miles." Then: "Nothing new within a million miles ..."

The skipper said bitingly:
"Then you'd better check on objects that are not new!" He turned aside, and his voice came more faintly as he
spoke into another microphone. "Mr. Taine! Arm all rockets and have your tube crews stand by in combat readiness!
Engine room! Prepare drive for emergency maneuvers! Damage-control parties, put on pressure suits and take
combat posts with equipment!" His voice rose again in volume. "Mr. Baird! How about observed objects?"

Diane murmured. Baird said briefly:
"Only one suspicious object, sir--and that shouldn't be suspicious. We are sending an information-beam at
something we'd classed as a burned-out comet. Pulse going out now, sir."

Diane had the distant-information transmitter aimed at what she'd said might be a dead comet. Baird pressed
the button. An extraordinary complex of information-seeking frequencies and forms sprang into being and leaped
across emptiness. There were microwaves of strictly standard amplitude, for measurement-standards. There were
frequencies of other values, which would be selectively absorbed by this material and that. There were laterally and
circularly polarized beams. When they bounced back, they would bring a surprising amount of information.

They returned. They did bring back news. The thing that had registered as a larger lump in a meteor-swarm was not a meteor at all. It returned four different frequencies with a relative-intensity pattern which said that they'd been reflected by bronze—probably silicon bronze. The polarized beams came back depolarized, of course, but with phase-changes which said the reflector had a rounded, regular form. There was a smooth hull of silicon bronze out yonder. There was other data.

"It will be a Plumie ship, sir," said Baird very steadily. "At a guess, they picked up our mapping beam and shot a single pulse at us to find out who and what we were. For another guess, by now they've picked up and analyzed our information-beam and know what we've found out about them."

The skipper scowled.

"How many of them?" he demanded. "Have we run into a fleet?"

"I'll check, sir," said Baird. "We picked up no tuned radiation from outer space, sir, but it could be that they picked us up when we came out of overdrive and stopped all their transmissions until they had us in a trap."

"Find out how many there are!" barked the skipper. "Make it quick! Report additional data instantly!"

His screen clicked off. Diane, more than a little pale, worked swiftly to plug the radar-room equipment into a highly specialized pattern. The Niccola was very well equipped, radar-wise. She'd been a type G8 Survey ship, and on her last stay in port she'd been rebuilt especially to hunt for and make contact with Plumies. Since the discovery of their existence, that was the most urgent business of the Space Survey. It might well be the most important business of the human race—on which its survival or destruction would depend. Other remodeled ships had gone out before the Niccola, and others would follow until the problem was solved. Meanwhile the Niccola's twenty-four rocket tubes and stepped-up drive and computer-type radar system equipped her for Plumie-hunting as well as any human ship could be. Still, if she'd been lured deep into the home system of the Plumies, the prospects were not good.

* * * * *

The new setup began its operation, instantly the last contact closed. The three-dimensional map served as a matrix to control it. The information-beam projector swung and flung out its bundle of oscillations. It swung and flashed, and swung and flashed. It had to examine every relatively nearby object for a constitution of silicon bronze and a rounded shape. The nearest objects had to be examined first. Speed was essential. But three-dimensional scanning takes time, even at some hundreds of pulses per minute.

Nevertheless, the information came in. No other silicon-bronze object within a quarter-million miles. Within half a million. A million. A million and a half. Two million ...

Baird called the navigation room.

"Looks like a single Plumie ship, sir," he reported. "At least there's one ship which is nearest by a very long way."

"Hah!" grunted the skipper. "Then we'll pay him a visit. Keep an open line, Mr. Baird!" His voice changed. "Mr. Taine! Report here at once to plan tactics!"

Baird shook his head, to himself. The Niccola's orders were to make contact without discovery, if such a thing were possible. The ideal would be a Plumie ship or the Plumie civilization itself, located and subject to complete and overwhelming envelopment by human ships—before the Plumies knew they'd been discovered. And this would be the human ideal because humans have always had to consider that a stranger might be hostile, until he'd proven otherwise.

Such a viewpoint would not be optimism, but caution. Yet caution was necessary. It was because the Survey brass felt the need to prepare for every unfavorable eventuality that Taine had been chosen as weapons officer of the Niccola. His choice had been deliberate, because he was a xenophobe. He had been a problem personality all his life. He had a seemingly congenital fear and hatred of strangers—which in mild cases is common enough, but Taine could not be cured without a complete breakdown of personality. He could not serve on a ship with a multiracial crew, because he was invincibly suspicious of and hostile to all but his own small breed. Yet he seemed ideal for weapons officer on the Niccola, provided he never commanded the ship. Because if the Plumies were hostile, a well-adjusted, normal man would never think as much like them as a Taine. He was capable of the kind of thinking Plumies might practice, if they were xenophobes themselves.

But to Baird, so extreme a precaution as a known psychopathic condition in an officer was less than wholly justified. It was by no means certain that the Plumies would instinctively be hostile. Suspicious, yes. Cautious, certainly. But the only fact known about the Plumie civilization came from the cairns and silicon-bronze inscribed tablets they'd left on oxygen-type worlds over a twelve-hundred-light-year range in space, and the only thing to be deduced about the Plumies themselves came from the decorative, formalized symbols like feathery plumes which were found on all their bronze tablets. The name "Plumies" came from that symbol.
Now, though, Taine was called to the navigation room to confer on tactics. The Nicolla swerved and drove toward the object Baird identified as a Plumie ship. This was at 05 hours 10 minutes ship time. The human ship had a definite velocity sunward, of course. The Plumie ship had been concealed by the meteor swarm of a totally unknown comet. It was an excellent way to avoid observation. On the other hand, the Nicolla had been mapping, which was bound to attract attention. Now each ship knew of the other's existence. Since the Nicolla had been detected, she had to carry out orders and attempt a contact to gather information.

*Baird verified that the Nicolla's course was exact for interception at her full-drive speed. He said in a flat voice:*

"I wonder how the Plumies will interpret this change of course? They know we're aware they're not a meteorite. But charging at them without even trying to communicate could look ominous. We could be stupid, or too arrogant to think of anything but a fight." He pressed the skipper's call and said evenly: "Sir, I request permission to attempt to communicate with the Plumie ship. We're ordered to try to make friends if we know we've been spotted."

Taine had evidently just reached the navigation room. His voice snapped from the speaker:

"I advise against that, sir! No use letting them guess our level of technology!"

Baird said coldly:

"They've a good idea already. We beamed them for data."

There was silence, with only the very faint humming sound which was natural in the ship in motion. It would be deadly to the nerves if there were absolute silence. The skipper grumbled:

"Requests and advice! Dammit! Mr. Baird, you might wait for orders! But I was about to ask you to try to make contact through signals. Do so."

His speaker clicked off. Baird said:

"It's in our laps. Diane. And yet we have to follow orders. Send the first roll."

Diane had a tape threaded into a transmitter. It began to unroll through a pickup head. She put on headphones. The tape began to transmit toward the Plumie. Back at base it had been reasoned that a pattern of clickings, plainly artificial and plainly stating facts known to both races, would be the most reasonable way to attempt to open contact. The tape sent a series of cardinal numbers--one to five. Then an addition table, from one plus one to five plus five. Then a multiplication table up to five times five. It was not startlingly intellectual information to be sent out in tiny clicks ranging up and down the radio spectrum. But it was orders.

Baird sat with compressed lips. Diane listened for a repetition of any of the transmitted signals, sent back by the Plumie. The speakers about the radar room murmured the orders given through all the ship. Radar had to be informed of all orders and activity, so it could check their results outside the ship. So Baird heard the orders for the engine room to be sealed up and the duty-force to get into pressure suits, in case the Nicolla fought and was hulled. Damage-control parties reported themselves on post, in suits, with equipment ready. Then Taine's voice snapped:

"Rocket crews, arm even-numbered rockets with chemical explosive warheads. Leave odd-numbered rockets armed with atomics. Report back!"

Diane strained her ears for possible re-transmission of the Nicolla's signals, which would indicate the Plumie's willingness to try conversation. But she suddenly raised her hand and pointed to the radar-graph instrument. It repeated the positioning of dots which were stray meteoric matter in the space between worlds in this system. What had been a spot--the Plumie ship--was now a line of dots. Baird pressed the button.

"Radar reporting!" he said curtly. "The Plumie ship is heading for us. I'll have relative velocity in ten seconds."

He heard the skipper swear. Ten seconds later the Doppler measurement became possible. It said the Plumie plunged toward the Nicolla at miles per second. In half a minute it was tens of miles per second. There was no re-transmission of signals. The Plumie ship had found itself discovered. Apparently it considered itself attacked. It flung itself into a headlong dash for the Nicolla.

*Time passed--interminable time. The sun flared and flamed and writhed in emptiness. The great gas-giant planet rolled through space in splendid state, its moonlets spinning gracefully about its bulk. The oxygen-atmosphere planet to sunward was visible only as a crescent, but the mottlings on its lighted part changed as it revolved--seas and islands and continents receiving the sunlight as it turned. Meteor swarms, so dense in appearance on a radar screen, yet so tenuous in reality, floated in their appointed orbits with a seeming vast leisure.*

The feel of slowness was actually the result of distance. Men have always acted upon things close by. Battles have always been fought within eye-range, anyhow. But it was actually 06 hours 35 minutes ship time before the two spacecraft sighted each other--more than two hours after they plunged toward a rendezvous.

The Plumie ship was a bright golden dot, at first. It decelerated swiftly. In minutes it was a rounded, end-on disk. Then it swerved lightly and presented an elliptical broadside to the Nicolla. The Nicolla was in full deceleration too, by then. The two ships came very nearly to a stop with relation to each other when they were..."
hardly twenty miles apart—which meant great daring on both sides.

Baird heard the skipper grumbling:

"DAMNED COCKY!" He roared suddenly: "MR. BAIRD! HOW'VE YOU MADE OUT IN COMMUNICATING WITH THEM?"

"NOT AT ALL, SIR," said Baird grimly. "THEY DON'T REPLY."

He knew from Diane's expression that there was no sound in the headphones except the frying noise all main-sequence stars give out, and the infrequent thumping noises that come from gas-giant planets' lower atmospheres, and the Jansky-radiation hiss which comes from everywhere.

The skipper swore. The Plumie ship lay broadside to, less than a score of miles away. It shone in the sunlight. It acted with extraordinary confidence. It was as if it dared the Niccola to open fire.

Taine's voice came out of a speaker, harsh and angry:

"EVEN-NUMBERED TUBES PREPARE TO FIRE ON COMMAND."

Nothing happened. The two ships floated sunward together, neither approaching nor retreating. But with every second, the need for action of some sort increased.

"MR. BAIRD!" barked the skipper. "THIS IS RIDICULOUS! THERE MUST BE SOME WAY TO COMMUNICATE! WE CAN'T SIT HERE GLARING AT EACH OTHER FOREVER! RAISE THEM! GET SOME SORT OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT!"

"I'M TRYING," said Baird bitterly, "ACCORDING TO ORDERS!"

But he disagreed with those orders. It was official theory that arithmetic values, repeated in proper order, would be the way to open conversation. The assumption was that any rational creature would grasp the idea that orderly signals were rational attempts to open communication.

But it had occurred to Baird that a Plumie might not see this point. Perception of order is not necessarily perception of information—in fact, quite the contrary. A message is a disturbance of order. A microphone does not transmit a message when it sends an unvarying tone. A message has to be unpredictable or it conveys no message. Orderly clicks, even if overheard, might seem to Plumies the result of methodically operating machinery. A race capable of interstellar flight was not likely to be interested or thrilled by exercises a human child goes through in kindergarten. They simply wouldn't seem meaningful at all.

But before he could ask permission to attempt to make talk in a more sophisticated fashion, voices exclaimed all over the ship. They came blurrily to the loud-speakers. "LOOK AT THAT!" "WHAT'S HE DO--" "SPINNING LIKE--" From every place where there was a vision-plate on the Niccola, men watched the Plumie ship and babbled.

This was at 06 hours 50 minutes ship time.

* * * * *

The elliptical golden object darted into swift and eccentric motion. Lacking an object of known size for comparison, there was no scale. The golden ship might have been the size of an autumn leaf, and in fact its maneuvers suggested the heedless tumblings and scurrying of falling foliage. It fluttered in swift turns and somersaults and spinnings. There were weavings like the purposeful feints of boxers not yet come to battle. There were indescribably graceful swoops and loops and curving dashes like some preposterous dance in emptiness.

Taine's voice crashed out of a speaker:

"ALL EVEN-NUMBERED ROCKETS," he barked. "FIRE!"

The skipper roared a countermand, but too late. The crunching, grunting sound of rockets leaving their launching tubes came before his first syllable was complete. Then there was silence while the skipper gathered breath for a masterpiece of profanity. But Taine snapped:

"THAT DANCE WAS A SNEAK-UP! THE PLUMIE CAME FOUR MILES NEARER WHILE WE WATCHED!"

Baird jerked his eyes from watching the Plumie. He looked at the master radar. It was faintly blurred with the fading lines of past gyrations, but the golden ship was much nearer the Niccola than it had been.

"RADAR REPORTING," said Baird sickishly. "MR. TAINÉ IS CORRECT. THE PLUMIE SHIP DID APPROACH US WHILE IT DANCED."

Taine's voice snarled:

"RELOAD EVEN NUMBERS WITH CHEMICAL-EXPLOSIVE WAR HEADS. THEN REMOVE ATOMICS FROM ODD NUMBERS AND REPLACE WITH CHEMICALS. THE RANGE IS TOO SHORT FOR ATOMICS."

Baird felt curiously divided in his own mind. He disliked Taine very much. Taine was arrogant and suspicious and intolerant even on the Niccola. But Taine had been right twice, now. The Plumie ship had crept closer by pure trickery. And it was right to remove atomic war heads from the rockets. They had a pure-blast radius of ten miles. To destroy the Plumie ship within twice that would endanger the Niccola—and leave nothing of the Plumie to examine afterward.

The Plumie ship must have seen the rocket flares, but it continued to dance, coming nearer and ever nearer in seemingly heedless and purposeless plungings and spinnings in star-speckled space. But suddenly there were racing, rushing trails of swirling vapor. Half the Niccola's port broadside plunged toward the golden ship. The fraction of a
second later, the starboard half-dozen chemical-explosive rockets swung furiously around the ship's hull and streaked after their brothers. They moved in utterly silent, straight-lined, ravening ferocity toward their target. Baird thought irrelevantly of the vapor trails of an atmosphere-liner in the planet's upper air.

The ruled-line straightness of the first six rockets' course abruptly broke. One of them veered crazily out of control. It shifted to an almost right-angled course. A second swung wildly to the left. A third and fourth and fifth--The sixth of the first line of rockets made a great, sweeping turn and came hurtling back toward the Niccola. It was like a nightmare. Lunatic, erratic lines of sunlit vapor eeled before the background of all the stars in creation.

Then the second half-dozen rockets broke ranks, as insanely and irremediably as the first.

Taine's voice screamed out of a speaker, hysterical with fury:
"Detonate! Detonate! They've taken over the rockets and are throwing 'em back at us! Detonate all rockets!"

The heavens seemed streaked and laced with lines of expanding smoke. But now one plunging line erupted at its tip. A swelling globe of smoke marked its end. Another blew up. And another--The Niccola's rockets faithfully blew themselves to bits on command from the Niccola's own weapons control. There was nothing else to be done with them. They'd been taken over in flight. They'd been turned and headed back toward their source. They'd have blasted the Niccola to bits but for their premature explosions.

There was a peculiar, stunned hush all through the Niccola. The only sound that came out of any speaker in the radar room was Taine's voice, high-pitched and raging, mouthing unspeakable hatred of the Plumies, whom no human being had yet seen.

Baird sat tense in the frustrated and desperate composure of the man who can only be of use while he is sitting still and keeping his head. The vision screen was now a blur of writhing mist, lighted by the sun and torn at by emptiness. There was luminosity where the ships had encountered each other. It was sunshine upon thin smoke. It was like the insanely enlarging head of a newborn comet, whose tail would be formed presently by light-pressure. The Plumie ship was almost invisible behind the unsubstantial stuff.

But Baird regarded his radar screens. Microwaves penetrated the mist of rapidly ionizing gases.
"Radar to navigation!" he said sharply. "The Plumie ship is still approaching, dancing as before!"

The skipper said with enormous calm:
"Any other Plumie ships, Mr. Baird?"

Diane interposed.
"No sign anywhere. I've been watching. This seems to be the only ship within radar range."

"We've time to settle with it, then," said the skipper. "Mr. Taine, the Plumie ship is still approaching."

Baird found himself hating the Plumies. It was not only that humankind was showing up rather badly, at the moment. It was that the Plumie ship had refused contact and forced a fight. It was that if the Niccola were destroyed the Plumie would carry news of the existence of humanity and of the tactics which worked to defeat them. The Plumies could prepare an irresistible fleet. Humanity could be doomed.

But he overheard himself saying bitterly:
"I wish I'd known this was coming, Diane. I ... wouldn't have resolved to be strictly official, only, until we got back to base."

Her eyes widened. She looked startled. Then she softened.
"If ... you mean that ... I wish so too."

"It looks like they've got us," he admitted unhappily. "If they can take our rockets away from us--" Then his voice stopped. He said, "Hold everything!" and pressed the navigation-room button. He snapped: "Radar to navigation. It appears to take the Plumies several seconds to take over a rocket. They have to aim something--a pressor or tractor beam, most likely--and pick off each rocket separately. Nearly forty seconds was consumed in taking over all twelve of our rockets. At shorter range, with less time available, a rocket might get through!"

The skipper swore briefly. Then:
"Mr. Taine! When the Plumies are near enough, our rockets may strike before they can be taken over! You follow?"

Baird heard Taine's shrill-voiced acknowledgment--in the form of practically chattered orders to his rocket-tube crews. Baird listened, checking the orders against what the situation was as the radars saw it. Taine's voice was almost unhuman; so filled with frantic rage that it cracked as he spoke. But the problem at hand was the fulfillment of all his psychopathic urges. He commanded the starboard-side rocket-battery to await special orders. Meanwhile the port-side battery would fire two rockets on widely divergent courses, curving to join at the Plumie ship. They'd be seized. They were to be detonated and another port-side rocket fired instantly, followed by a second hidden in the rocket-trail the first would leave behind. Then the starboard side--

"I'm afraid Taine's our only chance," said Baird reluctantly. "If he wins, we'll have time to ... talk as people do
who like each other. If it doesn't work--"
Diane said quietly:
"Anyhow ... I'm glad you ... wanted me to know. I ... wanted you to know, too."
She smiled at him, yearningly.
* * * * *

There was the crump-crump of two rockets going out together. Then the radar told what happened. The Plumie ship was no more than six miles away, dancing somehow deftly in the light of a yellow sun, with all the cosmos spread out as shining pin points of colored light behind it. The radar reported the dash and the death of the two rockets, after their struggle with invisible things that gripped them. They died when they headed reluctantly back to the Niccola—and detonated two miles from their parent ship. The skipper's voice came:
"Mr. Taine! After your next salvo I shall head for the Plumie at full drive, to cut down the distance and the time they have to work in. Be ready!"

The rocket tubes went crump-crump again, with a fifth of a second interval. The radar showed two tiny specks speeding through space toward the weaving, shifting speck which was the Plumie.

Outside, in emptiness, there was a filmy haze. It was the rocket-fumes and explosive gases spreading with incredible speed. It was thin as gossamer. The Plumie ship undoubtedly spotted the rockets, but it did not try to turn it. It somehow seized them and deflected them, and darted past them toward the Niccola.

"They see the trick," said Diane, dry-throated. "If they can get in close enough, they can turn it against us!"

There were noises inside the Niccola, now. Taine fairly howled an order. There were yells of defiance and excitement. There were more of those inadequate noises as rockets went out—every tube on the starboard side emptied itself in a series of savage grunts—and the Niccola's magnetronic drive roared at full flux density.

The two ships were less than a mile apart when the Niccola let go her full double broadside of missiles. And then it seemed that the Plumie ship was doomed. There were simply too many rockets to be seized and handled before at least one struck. But there was a new condition. The Plumie ship weaved and dodged its way through them. The new condition was that the rockets were just beginning their run. They had not achieved the terrific velocity they would accumulate in ten miles of no-gravity. They were new-launched; logy: clumsy: not the streaking, flashing death-and-destruction they would become with thirty more seconds of acceleration.

So the Plumie ship dodged them with a skill and daring past belief. With an incredible agility it got inside them, nearer to the Niccola than they. And then it hurled itself at the human ship as if bent upon a suicidal crash which would destroy both ships together. But Baird, in the radar room, and the skipper in navigation, knew that it would plunge brilliantly past at the last instant--

And then they knew that it would not. Because, very suddenly and very abruptly, there was something the matter with the Plumie ship. The life went out of it. It ceased to accelerate or decelerate. It ceased to steer. It began to turn slowly on an axis somewhere amidships. Its nose swung to one side, with no change in the direction of its motion. It floated onward. It was broadside to its line of travel. It continued to turn. It hurtled stern-first toward the Niccola. It did not swerve. It did not dance. It was a lifeless hulk: a derelict in space.

And it would hit the Niccola amidships with no possible result but destruction for both vessels.
* * * * *

The Niccola's skipper bellowed orders, as if shouting would somehow give them more effect. The magnetronic drive roared. He'd demanded a miracle of it, and he almost got one. The drive strained its thrust-members. It hopelessly overloaded its coils. The Niccola's cobalt-steel hull became more than saturated with the drive-field, and it leaped madly upon an evasion course--

And it very nearly got away. It was swinging clear when the Plumie ship drifted within fathoms. It was turning aside when the Plumie ship was within yards. And it was almost safe when the golden hull of the Plumie--shadowed now by the Niccola itself—barely scraped a side-keel.

There was a touch, seemingly deliberate and gentle. But the Niccola shuddered horribly. Then the vision screens flared from such a light as might herald the crack of doom. There was a brightness greater than the brilliance of the sun. And then there was a wrenching, heaving shock. Then there was blackness. Baird was flung across the radar room, and Diane cried out, and he careened against a wall and heard glass shatter. He called:
"Diane!"

He clutched crazily at anything, and called her name again. The Niccola's internal gravity was cut off, and his head spun, and he heard collision-doors closing everywhere, but before they closed completely he heard the rasping sound of giant arcs leaping in the engine room. Then there was silence.
"Diane!" cried Baird fiercely. "Diane!"
"I'm ... here," she panted. "I'm dizzy, but I ... think I'm all right--"
The battery-powered emergency light came on. It was faint, but he saw her clinging to a bank of instruments
where she'd been thrown by the collision. He moved to go to her, and found himself floating in midair. But he drifted to a side wall and worked his way to her.

She clung to him, shivering.

"I ... think," she said unsteadily, "that we're going to die. Aren't we?"

"We'll see," he told her. "Hold on to me."

Guided by the emergency light, he scrambled to the bank of communicator-buttons. What had been the floor was now a side wall. He climbed it and thumbed the navigation-room switch.

"Radar room reporting," he said curtly. "Power out, gravity off, no reports from outside from power failure. No great physical damage."

He began to hear other voices. There had never been an actual space-collision in the memory of man, but reports came crisply, and the cut-in speakers in the radar room repeated them. Ship-gravity was out all over the ship. Emergency lights were functioning, and were all the lights there were. There was a slight, unexplained gravity-drift toward what had been the ship's port side. But damage-control reported no loss of pressure in the Niccola's inner hull, though four areas between inner and outer hulls had lost air pressure to space.

"Mr. Baird," rasped the skipper. "We're blind! Forget everything else and give us eyes to see with!"

"We'll try battery power to the vision plates," Baird told Diane. "No full resolution, but better than nothing--"

They worked together, feverishly. They were dizzy. Something close to nausea came upon them from pure giddiness. What had been the floor was now a wall, and they had to climb to reach the instruments that had been on a wall and now were on the ceiling. But their weight was ounces only. Baird said abruptly:

"I know what's the matter! We're spinning! The whole ship's spinning! That's why we're giddy and why we have even a trace of weight. Centrifugal force! Ready for the current?"

There was a tiny click, and the battery light dimmed. But a vision screen lighted faintly. The stars it showed were moving specks of light. The sun passed deliberately across the screen. Baird switched to other outside scanners. There was power for only one screen at a time. But he saw the starkly impossible. He pressed the navigation-room button.

"Radar room reporting," he said urgently. "The Plumie ship is fast to us, in contact with our hull! Both ships are spinning together!" He was trying yet other scanners as he spoke, and now he said: "Got it! There are no lines connecting us to the Plumie, but it looks ... yes! That flash when the ships came together was a flash-over of high potential. We're welded to them along twenty feet of our hull!"

The skipper:

"Damnation! Any sign of intention to board us?"

"Not yet, sir--"

Taine burst in, his voice high-pitched and thick with hatred:

"Damage-control parties attention! Arm yourselves and assemble at starboard air lock! Rocket crews get into suits and prepare to board this Plumie--"

"Countermand!" bellowed the skipper from the speaker beside Baird's ear. "Those orders are canceled! Dammit, if we were successfully boarded we'd blow ourselves to bits! Those are our orders! D'you think the Plumies will let their ship be taken? And wouldn't we blow up with them? Mr. Taine, you will take no offensive action without specific orders! Defensive action is another matter. Mr. Baird! I consider this welding business pure accident. No one would be mad enough to plan it. You watch the Plumies and keep me informed!"

His voice ceased. And Baird had again the frustrating duty of remaining still and keeping his head while other men engaged in physical activity. He helped Diane to a chair--which was fastened to the floor--and she wedged herself fast and began a review of what each of the outside scanners reported. Baird called for more batteries. Power for the radar and visions was more important than anything else, just then. If there were more Plumie ships...

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Electricians half-floated, half-dragged extra batteries to the radar room. Baird hooked them in. The universe outside the ship again appeared filled with brilliantly colored dots of light which were stars. More satisfying, the globe-scanners again reported no new objects anywhere. Nothing new within a quarter million miles. A half-million. Later Baird reported:

"Radar report no strange objects within a million miles of the Niccola, sir."

"Except the ship we're welded to! But you are doing very well. However, microphones say there is movement inside the Plumie."

Diane beckoned for Baird's attention to a screen, which Baird had examined before. Now he stiffened and motioned for her to report.

"We've a scanner, sir," said Diane, "which faces what looks like a port in the Plumie ship. There's a figure at
the port. I can't make out details, but it is making motions, facing us."

"Give me the picture!" snapped the skipper.

Diane obeyed. It was the merest flip of a switch. Then her eyes went back to the spherical-sweep scanners which reported the bearing and distance of every solid object within their range. She set up two instruments which would measure the angle, bearing, and distance of the two planets now on this side of the sun--the gas-giant and the oxygen-world to sunward. Their orbital speeds and distances were known. The position, course, and speed of the Niccola could be computed from any two observations on them.

Diane had returned to the utterly necessary routine of the radar room which was the nerve-center of the ship, gathering all information needed for navigation in space. The fact that there had been a collision, that the Niccola's engines were melted to unlovely scrap, that the Plumie ship was now welded irremovably to a side-keel, and that a Plumie was signaling to humans while both ships went spinning through space toward an unknown destination--these things did not affect the obligations of the radar room.

Baird got other images of the Plumie ship into sharp focus. So near, the scanners required adjustment for precision.

"Take a look at this!" he said wryly.

She looked. The view was of the Plumie as welded fast to the Niccola. The welding was itself an extraordinary result of the Plumie's battle-tactics. Tractor and pressor beams were known to men, of course, but human beings used them only under very special conditions. Their operation involved the building-up of terrific static charges. Unless a tractor-beam generator could be grounded to the object it was to pull, it tended to emit lightning-bolts at unpredictable intervals and in entirely random directions. So men didn't use them. Obviously, the Plumies did.

They'd handled the Niccola's rockets with beams which charged the golden ship to billions of volts. And when the silicon-bronze Plumie ship touched the cobalt-steel Niccola--why--that charge had to be shared. It must have been the most spectacular of all artificial electric flames. Part of the Niccola's hull was vaporized, and undoubtedly part of the Plumie. But the unvaporized surfaces were molten and in contact--and they stuck.

For a good twenty feet the two ships were united by the most perfect of vacuum-welds. The wholly dissimilar hulls formed a space-catamaran, with a sort of valley between their bulks. Spinning deliberately, as the united ships did, sometimes the sun shone brightly into that valley, and sometimes it was filled with the blackness of the pit.

While Diane looked, a round door revolved in the side of the Plumie ship. As Diane caught her breath, Baird reported crisply. At his first words Taine burst into raging commands for men to follow him through the Niccola's air lock and fight a boarding party of Plumies in empty space. The skipper very savagely ordered him to be quiet.

"Only one figure has come out," reported Baird. The skipper watched on a vision plate, but Baird reported so all the Niccola's company would know. "It's small--less than five feet ... I'll see better in a moment." Sunlight smote down into the valley between the ships. "It's wearing a pressure suit. It seems to be the same material as the ship. It walks on two legs, as we do ... It has two arms, or something very similar ... The helmet of the suit is very high ... It looks like the armor knights used to fight in ... It's making its way to our air lock ... It does not use magnetic-soled shoes. It's holding onto lines threaded along the other ship's hull ..."

The skipper said curtly:

"Mr. Baird! I hadn't noticed the absence of magnetic shoes. You seem to have an eye for important items. Report to the air lock in person. Leave Lieutenant Holt to keep an eye on outside objects. Quickly, Mr. Baird!"

* * * * *

Baird laid his hand on Diane's shoulder. She smiled at him.

"I'll watch!" she promised.

He went out of the radar room, walking on what had been a side wall. The giddiness and dizziness of continued rotation was growing less, now. He was getting used to it. But the Niccola seemed strange indeed, with the standard up and down and Earth-gravity replaced by a vertical which was all askew and a weight of ounces instead of a hundred and seventy pounds.

He reached the air lock just as the skipper arrived. There were others there--armed and in pressure suits. The skipper glared about him.

"I am in command here," he said very grimly indeed. "Mr. Taine has a special function, but I am in command! We and the creatures on the Plumie ship are in a very serious fix. One of them apparently means to come on board. There will be no hostility, no sneering, no threatening gestures! This is a parley! You will be careful. But you will not be trigger-happy!"

He glared around again, just as a metallic rapping came upon the Niccola's air-lock door. The skipper nodded:

"Let him in the lock, Mr. Baird."

Baird obeyed. The humming of the unlocking-system sounded. There were clankings. The outer air lock dosed. There was a faint whistling as air went in. The skipper nodded again.
Baird opened the inner door. It was 08 hours 10 minutes ship time.

The Plumie stepped confidently out into the topsy-turvy corridors of the Niccola. He was about the size of a ten-year-old human boy, and features which were definitely not grotesque showed through the clear plastic of his helmet. His pressure suit was, engineering-wise, a very clean job. His whole appearance was prepossessing. When he spoke, very clear and quite high sounds--soprano sounds--came from a small speaker-unit at his shoulder.

"For us to talk," said the skipper heavily, "is pure nonsense. But I take it you've something to say."

The Plumie gazed about with an air of lively curiosity. Then he drew out a flat pad with a white surface and sketched swiftly. He offered it to the Niccola's skipper.

"We want this on record," he growled, staring about.

Diane's voice said capably from a speaker somewhere nearby:

"Sir, there's a scanner for inspection of objects brought aboard. Hold the plate flat and I'll have a photograph--right!"

The skipper said curtly to the Plumie:

"You've drawn our two ships linked as they are. What have you to say about it?"

He handed back the plate. The Plumie pressed a stud and it was blank again. He sketched and offered it once more.

"Hm-m-m," said the skipper. "You can't use your drive while we're glued together, eh? Well?"

The Plumie reached up and added lines to the drawing.

"So!" rumbled the skipper, inspecting the additions. "You say it's up to us to use our drive for both ships." He growled approvingly: "You consider there's a truce. You must, because we're both in the same fix, and not a nice one, either. True enough! We can't fight each other without committing suicide, now. But we haven't any drive left! We're a derelict! How am I going to say that--if I decide to?"

Baird could see the lines on the plate, from the angle at which the skipper held it. He said:

"Sir, we've been mapping, up in the radar room. Those last lines are map-co-ordinates--a separate sketch, sir. I think he's saying that the two ships, together, are on a falling course toward the sun. That we have to do something or both vessels will fall into it. We should be able to check this, sir."

"Hah!" growled the skipper. "That's all we need! Absolutely all we need! To come here, get into a crazy right, have our drive melt to scrap, get crazily welded to a Plumie ship, and then for both of us to fry together! We don't need anything more than that!"

Diane's voice came on the speaker:

"Sir, the last radar fixes on the planets in range give us a course directly toward the sun. I'll repeat the observations."

The skipper growled. Taine thrust himself forward. He snarled:

"Why doesn't this Plumie take off its helmet? It lands on oxygen planets! Does it think it's too good to breathe our air?"

Baird caught the Plumie's eye. He made a gesture suggesting the removal of the space helmet. The Plumie gestured, in return, to a tiny vent in the suit. He opened something and gas whistled out. He cut it off. The question of why he did not open or remove his helmet was answered. The atmosphere he breathed would not do men any good, nor would theirs do him any good, either. Taine said suspiciously:

"How do we know he's breathing the stuff he let out then? This creature isn't human! It's got no right to attack humans! Now it's trying to trick us!" His voice changed to a snarl. "We'd better wring its neck! Teach its kind a lesson--"

The skipper roared at him.

"Be quiet! Our ship is a wreck! We have to consider the facts! We and these Plumies are in a fix together, and we have to get out of it before we start to teach anybody anything!" He glared at Taine. Then he said heavily: "Mr. Baird, you seem to notice things. Take this Plumie over the ship. Show him our drive melted down, so he'll realize we can't possibly tow his ship into an orbit. He knows that we're armed, and that we can't handle our war heads at this range! So we can't fool each other. We might as well be frank. But you will take full note of his reactions, Mr. Baird!"

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Baird advanced, and the skipper made a gesture. The Plumie regarded Baird with interested eyes. And Baird led the way for a tour of the Niccola. It was confusing even to him, with right hand converted to up and left hand to down, and sidewise now almost vertical. On the way the Plumie made more clear, flutelike sounds, and more gestures. Baird answered.

"Our gravity pull was that way," he explained, "and things fell so fast."

He grasped a handrail and demonstrated the speed with which things fell in normal ship-gravity. He used a
pocket communicator for the falling weight. It was singularly easy to say some things, even highly technical ones, because they'd be what the Plumie would want to know. But quite commonplace things would be very difficult to convey.

Diane's voice came out of the communicator.

"There are no novelties outside," she said quietly. "It looks like this is the only Plumie ship anywhere around. It could have been exploring, like us. Maybe it was looking for the people who put up Space-Survey markers."

"Maybe," agreed Baird, using the communicator. "Is that stuff about falling into the sun correct?"

"It seems so," said Diane composedly. "I'm checking again. So far, the best course I can get means we graze the sun's photosphere in fourteen days six hours, allowing for acceleration by the sun's gravity."

"And you and I," said Baird wryly, "have been acting as professional associates only, when--"

"Don't say it!" said Diane shakily. "It's terrible!"

He put the communicator back in his pocket. The Plumie had watched him. He had a peculiarly gallant air, this small figure in golden space armor with its high-crested helmet.

They reached the engine room. And there was the giant drive shaft of the Niccola, once wrapped with yard-thick coils which could induce an incredible density of magnetic flux in the metal. Even the return magnetic field, through the ship's cobalt-steel hull, was many times higher than saturation. Now the coils were sagging: mostly melted. There were places where re-solidified metal smoked noisomely against nonmetallic floor or wall-covering. Engineers labored doggedly in the trivial gravity to clean up the mess.

"It's past repair," said Baird, to the ship's first engineer.

"It's junk," said that individual dourly. "Give us six months and a place to set up a wire-drawing mill and an insulator synthesizer, and we could rebuild it. But nothing less will be any good."

The Plumie stared at the drive. He examined the shaft from every angle. He inspected the melted, and partly-melted, and merely burned-out sections of the drive coils. He was plainly unable to understand in any fashion the principle of the magnetronic drive. Baird was tempted to try to explain, because there was surely no secret about a ship drive, but he could imagine no diagrams or gestures which would convey the theory of what happened in cobalt-steel when it was magnetized beyond one hundred thousand Gauss' flux-density. And without that theory one simply couldn't explain a magnetronic drive.

They left the engine room. They visited the rocket batteries. The generator room was burned out, like the drive, by the inconceivable lightning bolt which had passed between the ships on contact. The Plumie was again puzzled. Baird made it clear that the generator-room supplied electric current for the ship's normal lighting-system and services. The Plumie could grasp that idea. They examined the crew's quarters, and the mess room, and the Plumie walked confidently among the members of the human crew, who a little while since had tried so painstakingly to destroy his vessel. He made a good impression.

"These little guys," said a crewman to Baird, admiringly, "they got something. They can handle a ship! I bet they could almost make that ship of theirs play checkers!"

"Close to it," agreed Baird. He realized something. He pulled the communicator from his pocket. "Diane! Contact the skipper. He wanted observations. Here's one. This Plumie acts like soldiers used to act in ancient days--when they wore armor. And we have the same reaction! They will fight like the devil, but during a truce they'll be friendly, admiring each other as scrappers, but ready to fight as hard as ever when the truce is over. We have the same reaction! Tell the skipper I've an idea that it's a part of their civilization--maybe it's a necessary part of any civilization! Tell him I guess that there may be necessarily parallel evolution of attitudes, among rational races, as there are parallel evolutions of eyes and legs and wings and fins among all animals everywhere! If I'm right, somebody from this ship will be invited to tour the Plumie! It's only a guess, but tell him!"

"Immediately," said Diane.

* * * * *

The Plumie followed gallantly as Baird made a steep climb up what once was the floor of a corridor. Then Taine stepped out before them. His eyes burned.

"Giving him a clear picture, eh?" he rasped. "Letting him spy out everything?"

Baird pressed the communicator call for the radar room and said coldly:

"I'm obeying orders. Look, Taine! You were picked for your job because you were a xenophobe. It helps in your proper functioning. But this Plumie is here under a flag of truce--"

"Flag of truce!" snarled Taine. "It's vermin! It's not human! I'll--"

"If you move one inch nearer him," said Baird gently, "just one inch--"

The skipper's voice bellowed through the general call speakers all over the ship:

"Mr. Taine! You will go to your quarters, under arrest! Mr. Baird, burn him down if he hesitates!"

Then there was a rushing, and scrambling figures appeared and were all about. They were members of the
Niccola's crew, sent by the skipper. They regarded the Plumie with detachment, but Taine with a wary expectancy. Taine turned purple with fury. He shouted. He raged. He called Baird and the others Plumie-lovers and vermin-worshipers. He shouted foulnesses at them. But he did not attack.

When, still shouting, he went away, Baird said apologetically to the Plumie:

"He's a xenophobe. He has a pathological hatred of strangers—even of strangeness. We have him on board because—"

Then he stopped. The Plumie wouldn't understand, of course. But his eyes took on a curious look. It was almost as if, looking at Baird, they twinkled.

Baird took him back to the skipper.

"He's got the picture, sir," he reported.

The Plumie pulled out his sketch plate. He drew on it. He offered it. The skipper said heavily:

"You guessed right, Mr. Baird. He suggests that someone from this ship go on board the Plumie vessel. He's drawn two pressure-suited figures going in their air lock. One's larger than the other. Will you go?"

"Naturally!" said Baird. Then he added thoughtfully: "But I'd better carry a portable scanner, sir. It should work perfectly well through a bronze hull, sir."

The skipper nodded and began to sketch a diagram which would amount to an acceptance of the Plumie's invitation.

This was at 07 hours 40 minutes ship time. Outside the sedately rotating metal hulls—the one a polished blue-silver and the other a glittering golden bronze—the cosmos continued to be as always. The haze from explosive fumes and rocket-fuel was, perhaps, a little thinner. The brighter stars shone through it. The gas-giant planet outward from the sun was a perceptible disk instead of a diffuse glow. The oxygen-planet to sunward showed again as a lighted crescent.

Presently Baird, in a human spacesuit, accompanied the Plumie into the Niccola's air lock and out to emptiness. His magnetic-soled shoes clung to the Niccola's cobalt-steel skin. Fastened to his shoulder there was a tiny scanner and microphone, which would relay everything he saw and heard back to the radar room and to Diane.

She watched tensely as he went inside the Plumie ship. Other screens relayed the image and his voice to other places on the Niccola.

He was gone a long time. From the beginning, of course, there were surprises. When the Plumie escort removed his helmet, on his own ship, the reason for the helmet's high crest was apparent. He had a high crest of what looked remarkably like feathers—and it was not artificial. It grew there. The reason for conventionalized plumes on bronze survey plates was clear. It was exactly like the reason for human features or figures as decorative additions to the inscriptions on Space Survey marker plates. Even the Plumie's hands had odd crestlets which stood out when he bent his fingers. The other Plumies were no less graceful and no less colorful. They had equally clear soprano voices. They were equally miniature and so devoid of apparent menace.

But there were also technical surprises. Baird was taken immediately to the Plumie ship's engine room, and Diane heard the sharp intake of breath with which he appeared to recognize its working principle. There were Plumie engineers working feverishly at it, attempting to discover something to repair. But they found nothing. The Plumie drive simply would not work.

They took Baird through the ship's entire fabric. And their purpose, when it became clear, was startling. The Plumie ship had no rocket tubes. It had no beam-projectors except small-sized objects which were—which must be—their projectors of tractor and pressor beams. They were elaborately grounded to the ship's substance. But they were not originally designed for ultra-heavy service. They hadn't and couldn't have the enormous capacity Baird had expected. He was astounded.

* * * * *

When he returned to the Niccola, he went instantly to the radar room to make sure that pictures taken through his scanner had turned out well. And there was Diane.

But the skipper's voice boomed at him from the wall.

"Mr. Baird! What have you to add to the information you sent back?"

"Three items, sir," said Baird. He drew a deep breath. "For the first, sir, the Plumie ship is unarmed. They've tractor and pressor beams for handling material. They probably use them to build their cairns. But they weren't meant for weapons. The Plumies, sir, hadn't a thing to fight with when they drove for us after we detected them."

The skipper blinked hard.

"Are you sure of that, Mr. Baird?"

"Yes, sir," said Baird uncomfortably. "The Plumie ship is an exploring ship—a survey ship, sir. You saw their mapping equipment. But when they spotted us, and we spotted them— they bluffed! When we fired rockets at them, they turned them back with tractor and pressor beams. They drove for us, sir, to try to destroy us with our own
bombs, because they didn't have any of their own."

The skipper's mouth opened and closed.

"Another item, sir," said Baird more uncomfortably still. "They don't use iron or steel. Every metal object I saw was either a bronze or a light metal. I suspect some of their equipment's made of potassium, and I'm fairly sure they use sodium in the place of aluminum. Their atmosphere's quite different from ours--obviously! They'd use bronze for their ship's hull because they can venture into an oxygen atmosphere in a bronze ship. A sodium-hulled ship would be lighter, but it would burn in oxygen. Where there was moisture--"

The skipper blinked.

"But they couldn't drive in a non-magnetic hull!" he protested. "A ship has to be magnetic to drive!"

"Sir," said Baird, his voice still shaken, "they don't use a magnetronic drive. I once saw a picture of the drive they use, in a stereo on the history of space travel. The principle's very old. We've practically forgotten it. It's a Dirac pusher-drive, sir. Among us humans, it came right after rockets. The planets of Sol were first reached by ships using Dirac pushers. But--" He paused. "They won't operate in a magnetic field above seventy Gauss, sir. It's a static-charge reaction, sir, and in a magnetic field it simply stops working."

The skipper regarded Baird unwinkingly for a long time.

"I think you are telling me," he said at long last, "that the Plumies' drive would work if they were cut free of the Niccola."

"Yes, sir," said Baird. "Their engineers were opening up the drive-elements and checking them, and then closing them up again. They couldn't seem to find anything wrong. I don't think they know what the trouble is. It's the Niccola's magnetic field. I think it was our field that caused the collision by stopping their drive and killing all their controls when they came close enough."

"Did you tell them?" demanded the skipper.

"There was no easy way to tell them by diagrams, sir."

Taine's voice cut in. It was feverish. It was strident. It was triumphant.

"Sir! The Niccola is effectively a wreck and unrepairable. But the Plumie ship is operable if cut loose. As weapons officer, I intend to take the Plumie ship, let out its air, fill its tanks with our air, start up its drive, and turn it over to you for navigation back to base!"

Baird raged. But he said coldly:

"We're a long way from home, Mr. Taine, and the Dirac pusher drive is slow. If we headed back to base in the Plumie ship with its Dirac pusher, we'd all be dead of old age before we'd gone halfway."

"But unless we take it," raged Taine, "we hit this sun in fourteen days! We don't have to die now! We can land on the oxygen planet up ahead! We've only to kill these vermin and take their ship, and we'll live!"

Diane's voice said dispassionately:

"Report. A Plumie in a pressure suit just came out of their air lock. It's carrying a parcel toward our air lock."

Taine snarled instantly:

"They'll sneak something in the Niccola to blast it, and then cut free and go away!"

The skipper said very quietly:

"I doubt they think it possible to cut the ships apart. A torch is no good on thick silicon bronze. It conducts heat too well! And they don't use steel. They probably haven't a cutting-torch at all."

* * * * *

From the radar room he watched the Plumie place an object in the air lock and withdraw. He watched from a scanner inside the ship as someone brought in what the Plumie had left. An electronics man bustled forward. He looked it over quickly. It was complex, but his examination suddenly seemed satisfying to him. But a grayish vapor developed and he sniffed and wrinkled his nose. He picked up a communicator.

"Mr. Taine, credit me with minimum brains! There is no way the Plumies can take this ship without an atomic bomb exploding to destroy both ships. You should know it!" Then he snapped: "Air lock area, listen for a knock, and let in the Plumie or the parcel he leaves."

There was silence. Baird said very quietly:

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"Sir, they've sent us a power-generator. Some of its parts are going bad in our atmosphere, sir, but this looks to me like a hell of a good idea for a generator! I never saw anything like it, but it's good! You can set it for any voltage and it'll turn out plenty juice!"

"Put it in helium," snapped the skipper. "It won't break down in that! Then see how it serves!"

In the radar room, Baird drew a deep breath. He went carefully to each of the screens and every radar. Diane saw what he was about, and checked with him. They met at the middle of the radar room.

"Everything's checked out," said Baird gravely. "There's nothing else around. There's nothing we can be called on to do before something happens. So ... we can ... act like people."
Diane smiled very faintly.
"Not like people. Just like us." She said wistfully: "Don't you want to tell me something? Something you intended to tell me only after we got back to base?"

He did. He told it to her. And there was also something she had not intended to tell him at all—unless he told her first. She said it now. They felt that such sayings were of the greatest possible importance. They clung together, saying them again. And it seemed wholly monstrous that two people who cared so desperately had wasted so much time acting like professional associates—explorer-ship officers—when things like this were to be said...

As they talked incoherently, or were even more eloquently silent, the ship's ordinary lights came on. The battery-lamp went on.

"We've got to switch back to ship's circuit," said Baird reluctantly. They separated, and restored the operating circuits to normal. "We've got fourteen days," he added, "and so much time to be on duty, and we've a lost lifetime to live in fourteen days! Diane—"

She flushed vividly. So Baird said very politely into the microphone to the navigation room:
"Sir, Lieutenant Holt and myself would like to speak directly to you in the navigation room. May we?"

"Why not?" growled the skipper. "You've noticed that the Plumie generator is giving the whole ship lights and services?"

"Yes, sir," said Baird. "We'll be there right away."

* * * * *

They heard the skipper's grunt as they hurried through the door. A moment later the ship's normal gravity returned—also through the Plumie generator. Up was up again, and down was down, and the corridors and cabins of the Niccola were brightly illuminated. Had the ship been other than an engineless wreck, falling through a hundred and fifty million miles of emptiness into the flaming photosphere of a sun, everything would have seemed quite normal, including the errand Baird and Diane were upon, and the fact that they held hands self-consciously as they went about it.

They skirted the bulkhead of the main air tank. They headed along the broader corridor which went past the indented inner door of the air lock. They had reached that indentation when Baird saw that the inner air-lock door was closing. He saw a human pressure suit past its edge. He saw the corner of some object that had been put down on the air-lock floor.

Baird shouted, and rushed toward the lock. He seized the inner handle and tried to force open the door again, so that no one inside it could emerge into the emptiness without. He failed. He wrenched frantically at the control of the outer door. It suddenly swung freely. The outer door had been put on manual. It could be and was being opened from inside.

"Tell the skipper," raged Baird. "Taine's taking something out!" He tore open a pressure-suit cupboard in the wall beside the lock door. "He'll make the Plumies think it's a return-gift for the generator!" He eelied into the pressure suit and zipped it up to his neck. "The man's crazy! He thinks we can take their ship and stay alive for a while! Dammit, our air would ruin half their equipment! Tell the skipper to send help!"

He wrenched at the door again, jamming down his helmet with one hand. And this time the control worked. Taine, most probably, had forgotten that the inner control was disengaged only when the manual was actively in use. Diane raced away, panting. Baird swore bitterly at the slowness of the outer door's closing. He saw the corner of some object that had been put down on the air-lock floor.

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His momentum carried him almost too far. He fell, and only the magnetic soles of his shoes enabled him to check himself. He was in that singular valley between the two ships, where their hulls were impregnably welded fast. Round-hulled Plumie ship, and ganoid-shaped Niccola, they stuck immovably together as if they had been that way since time began. Where the sky appeared above Baird's head, the stars moved in stately procession across the valley roof.

He heard a metallic rapping through the fabric of his space armor. Then sunlight glittered, and the valley filled with a fierce glare, and a man in a human spacesuit stood on the Niccola's plating, opposite the Plumie air lock. He held a bulky object under his arm. With his other gauntlet he rapped again.

"You fool!" shouted Baird. "Stop that! We couldn't use their ship, anyhow!"

His space phone had turned on with the air supply. Taine's voice snarled:
"We'll try! You keep back! They are not human!"

But Baird ran toward him. The sensation of running upon magnetic-soled shoes was unearthly: it was like trying to run on fly-paper or bird-lime. But in addition there was no gravity here, and no sense of balance, and there was the feeling of perpetual fall.

There could be no science nor any skill in an encounter under such conditions. Baird partly ran and partly
staggered and partly skated to where Taine faced him, snarling. He threw himself at the other man—and then the sun vanished behind the bronze ship's hull, and only stars moved visibly in all the universe.

* * * * *

But the sound of his impact was loud in Baird's ears inside the suit. There was a slightly different sound when his armor struck Taine's, and when it struck the heavier metal of the two ships. He fought. But the suits were intended to be defense against greater stresses than human blows could offer. In the darkness, it was like two blindfolded men fighting each other while encased in pillows.

Then the sun returned, floating sedately above the valley, and Baird could see his enemy. He saw, too, that the Plumie air lock was now open and that a small, erect, and somehow jaunty figure in golden space armor stood in the opening and watched gravely as the two men fought.

Taine cursed, panting with hysterical hate. He flung himself at Baird, and Baird toppled because he'd put one foot past the welded boundary between the Niccola's cobalt steel and the Plumie ship's bronze. One foot held to nothing. And that was a ghastly sensation, because if Taine only rugged his other foot free and heaved—why—then Baird would go floating away from the rotating, now-twinned ships, floating farther and farther away forever.

But darkness fell, and he scrambled back to the Niccola's hull as a disorderly parade of stars went by above him. He pantingly waited fresh attack. He felt something—and it was the object Taine had meant to offer as a return present to the Plumies. It was unquestionably explosive, either booby-trapped or timed to explode inside the Plumie ship. Now it rocked gently, gripped by the magnetism of the steel.

The sun appeared again, and Taine was yards away, crawling and fumbling for Baird. Then he saw him, and rose and rushed, and the clankings of his shoe-soles were loud. Baird flung himself at Taine in a savage tackle.

He struck Taine's legs a glancing blow, and the cobalt steel held his armor fast, but Taine careened and bounced against the round bronze wall of the Plumie, and bounced again. Then he screamed, because he went floating slowly to emptiness, his arms and legs jerking spasmodically, while he shrieked...

The Plumie in the air lock stepped out. He trailed a cord behind him. He leaped briskly toward nothingness.

There came quick darkness once more, and Baird struggled erect despite the adhesiveness of the Niccola's hull. When he was fully upright, sick with horror at what had come about, there was sunlight yet again, and men were coming out of the Niccola's air lock, and the Plumie who'd leaped for space was pulling himself back to his own ship again. He had a loop of the cord twisted around Taine's leg. But Taine screamed and screamed inside his spacesuit.

It was odd that one could recognize the skipper even inside space armor. But Baird felt sick. He saw Taine received, still screaming, and carried into the lock. The skipper growled an infuriated demand for details. His space phone had come on, too, when its air supply began. Baird explained, his teeth chattering.

"Hah!" grunted the skipper. "Taine was a mistake. He shouldn't ever have left ground. When a man's potty in one fashion, there'll be cracks in him all over. What's this?"

The Plumie in the golden armor very soberly offered the skipper the object Taine had meant to introduce into the Plumie's ship. Baird said desperately that he'd fought against it, because he believed it a booby trap to kill the Plumies so men could take their ship and fill it with air and cut it free, and then make a landing somewhere.

"Damned foolishness!" rumbled the skipper. "Their ship'd begin to crumble with our air in it! If it held to a landing—"

Then he considered the object he'd accepted from the Plumie. It could have been a rocket war head, enclosed in some container that would detonate it if opened. Or there might be a timing device. The skipper grunted. He heaved it skyward.

The misshapen object went floating away toward emptiness. Sunlight smote harshly upon it.

"Don't want it back in the Niccola," growled the skipper, "but just to make sure—"

He fumbled a hand weapon out of his belt. He raised it, and it spatred flame—very tiny blue-white sparks, each one indicating a pellet of metal flung away at high velocity.

One of them struck the shining, retreating container. It exploded with a monstrous, soundless, violence. It had been a rocket's war head. There could have been only one reason for it to be introduced into a Plumie ship. Baird ceased to be shaky. Instead, he was ashamed.

The skipper growled inarticulately. He looked at the Plumie, again standing in the golden ship's air lock.

"We'll go back, Mr. Baird. What you've done won't save our lives, and nobody will ever know you did it. But I think well of you. Come along!"

This was at 11 hours 5 minutes ship time.

* * * * *

A good half hour later the skipper's voice bellowed from the speakers all over the Niccola. His heavy-jowled features stared doggedly out of screens wherever men were on duty or at ease.

"Hear this!" he said forbiddingly. "We have checked our course and speed. We have verified that there is no
possible jury-rig for our engines that could get us into any sort of orbit, let alone land us on the only planet in this system with air we could breathe. It is officially certain that in thirteen days nine hours from now, the Niccola will be so close to the sun that her hull will melt down. Which will be no loss to us because we'll be dead then, still going on into the sun to be vaporized with the ship. There is nothing to be done about it. We can do nothing to save our own lives!"

He glared out of each and every one of the screens, wherever there were men to see him.

"But," he rumbled, "the Plumies can get away if we help them. They have no cutting torches. We have. We can cut their ship free. They can repair their drive--but it's most likely that it'll operate perfectly when they're a mile from the Niccola's magnetic field. They can't help us. But we can help them. And sooner or later some Plumie ship is going to encounter some other human ship. If we cut these Plumies loose, they'll report what we did. When they meet other men, they'll be cagey because they'll remember Taine. But they'll know they can make friends, because we did them a favor when we'd nothing to gain by it. I can offer no reward. But I ask for volunteers to go outside and cut the Plumie ship loose, so the Plumies can go home in safety instead of on into the sun with us!"

He glared, and cut off the image.

Diane held tightly to Baird's hand, in the radar room. He said evenly:

"There'll be volunteers. The Plumies are pretty sporting characters--putting up a fight with an unarmed ship, and so on. If there aren't enough other volunteers, the skipper and I will cut them free by ourselves."

Diane said, dry-throated:

"I'll help. So I can be with you. We've got--so little time."

"I'll ask the skipper as soon as the Plumie ship's free."

"Y-yes," said Diane. And she pressed her face against his shoulder, and wept.

This was at 01 hours, 20 minutes ship time. At 03 hours even, there was peculiar activity in the valley between the welded ships. There were men in space armor working cutting-torches where for twenty feet the two ships were solidly attached. Blue-white flames bored savagely into solid metal, and melted copper gave off strangely colored clouds of vapor--which emptiness whisked away to nothing--and molten iron and cobalt made equally lurid clouds of other colors.

There were Plumies in the air lock, watching.

At 03 hours 40 minutes ship time, all the men but one drew back. They went inside the Niccola. Only one man remained, cutting at the last sliver of metal that held the two ships together.

It parted. The Plumie ship swept swiftly away, moved by the centrifugal force of the rotary motion the joined vessels had possessed. It dwindled and dwindled. It was a half mile away. A mile. The last man on the outside of the Niccola's hull thriftily brought his torch to the air lock and came in.

Suddenly, the distant golden hull came to life. It steadied. It ceased to spin, however slowly. It darted ahead. It checked. It swung to the right and left and up and down. It was alive again.

* * * * *

In the radar room, Diane walked into Baird's arms and said shakily:

"Now we... we have almost fourteen days."

"Wait," he commanded. "When the Plumies understood what we were doing, and why, they drew diagrams. They hadn't thought of cutting free, out in space, without the spinning saws they use to cut bronze with. But they asked for a scanner and a screen. They checked on its use. I want to see--"

He flipped on the screen. And there was instantly a Plumie looking eagerly out of it, for some sign of communication established. There were soprano sounds, and he waved a hand for attention. Then he zestfully held up one diagram after another.

Baird drew a deep breath. A very deep breath. He pressed the navigation-room call. The skipper looked dourly at him.

"Well?" said the skipper forbiddingly.

"Sir," said Baird, very quietly indeed, "the Plumies are talking by diagram over the communicator set we gave them. Their drive works. They're as well off as they ever were. And they've been modifying their tractor beams--stepping them up to higher power."

"What of it?" demanded the skipper, rumbling.

"They believe," said Baird, "that they can handle the Niccola with their beefed-up tractor beams." He wetted his lips. "They're going to tow us to the oxygen planet ahead, sir. They're going to set us down on it. They'll help us find the metals we need to build the tools to repair the Niccola, sir. You see the reasoning, sir. We turned them loose to improve the chance of friendly contact when another human ship runs into them. They want us to carry back--to be proof that Plumies and men can be friends. It seems that--they like us, sir."

He stopped for a moment. Then he went on reasonably;
"And besides that, it'll be one hell of a fine business proposition. We never bother with hydrogen-methane planets. They've minerals and chemicals we haven't got, but even the stones of a methane-hydrogen planet are ready to combine with the oxygen we need to breathe! We can't carry or keep enough oxygen for real work. The same thing's true with them on an oxygen planet. We can't work on each other's planets, but we can do fine business in each other's minerals and chemicals from those planets. I've got a feeling, sir, that the Plumie cairns are location-notices; markers set up over ore deposits they can find but can't hope to work, yet they claim against the day when their scientists find a way to make them worth owning. I'd be willing to bet, sir, that if we explored hydrogen planets as thoroughly as oxygen ones, we'd find cairns on their-type planets that they haven't colonized yet."

The skipper stared. His mouth dropped open.

"And I think, sir," said Baird, "that until they detected us they thought they were the only intelligent race in the galaxy. They were upset to discover suddenly that they were not, and at first they'd no idea what we'd be like. But I'm guessing now, sir, that they're figuring on what chemicals and ores to start swapping with us." Then he added, "When you think of it, sir, probably the first metal they ever used was aluminum--where our ancestors used copper--and they had a beryllium age next, instead of iron. And right now, sir it's probably as expensive for them to refine iron as it is for us to handle titanium and beryllium and osmium--which are duck soup for them! Our two cultures ought to thrive as long as we're friends, sir. They know it already--and we'll find it out in a hurry!"

The skipper's mouth moved. It closed, and then dropped open again. The search for the Plumies had been made because it looked like they had to be fought. But Baird had just pointed out some extremely common-sense items which changed the situation entirely. And there was evidence that the Plumies saw the situation the new way. The skipper felt such enormous relief that his manner changed. He displayed what was almost effusive cordiality--for the skipper. He cleared his throat.

"Hm-m-m. Hah! Very good, Mr. Baird," he said formidably. "And of course with time and air and metals we can rebuild our drive. For that matter, we could rebuild the Niccola! I'll notify the ship's company, Mr. Baird. Very good!" He moved to use another microphone. Then he checked himself. "Your expression is odd, Mr. Baird. Did you wish to say something more?"

"Y-yes, sir," said Baird. He held Diane's hand fast. "It'll be months before we get back to port, sir. And it's normally against regulations, but under the circumstances ... would you mind ... as skipper ... marrying Lieutenant Holt and me?"

The skipper snorted. Then he said almost--almost--amiably;

"Hm-m-m. You've both done very well, Mr. Baird. Yes. Come to the navigation room and we'll get it over with. Say--ten minutes from now."

Baird grinned at Diane. Her eyes shone a little.

This was at 04 hours 10 minutes ship time. It was exactly twelve hours since the alarm-bell rang.

THE END
Gramps Ford, his chin resting on his hands, his hands on the crook of his cane, was staring irascibly at the five-foot television screen that dominated the room. On the screen, a news commentator was summarizing the day's happenings. Every thirty seconds or so, Gramps would jab the floor with his cane-tip and shout, "Hell, we did that a hundred years ago!"

Emerald and Lou, coming in from the balcony, where they had been seeking that 2185 A.D. rarity--privacy--were obliged to take seats in the back row, behind Lou's father and mother, brother and sister-in-law, son and daughter-in-law, grandson and wife, granddaughter and husband, great-grandson and wife, nephew and wife, grandnephew and wife, great-grandniece and husband, great-grandnephew and wife--and, of course, Gramps, who was in front of everybody. All save Gramps, who was somewhat withered and bent, seemed, by pre-anti-gerasone standards, to be about the same age--somewhere in their late twenties or early thirties. Gramps looked older because he had already reached 70 when anti-gerasone was invented. He had not aged in the 102 years since.

"Meanwhile," the commentator was saying, "Council Bluffs, Iowa, was still threatened by stark tragedy. But 200 weary rescue workers have refused to give up hope, and continue to dig in an effort to save Elbert Haggedorn, 183, who has been wedged for two days in a ..."

"I wish he'd get something more cheerful," Emerald whispered to Lou.

* * * * *

"Silence!" cried Gramps. "Next one shoots off his big bazoo while the TV's on is gonna find hisself cut off without a dollar--" his voice suddenly softened and sweetened--"when they wave that checkered flag at the Indianapolis Speedway, and old Gramps gets ready for the Big Trip Up Yonder."

He sniffed sentimentally, while his heirs concentrated desperately on not making the slightest sound. For them, the poignancy of the prospective Big Trip had been dulled somewhat, through having been mentioned by Gramps about once a day for fifty years.

"Dr. Brainard Keyes Bullard," continued the commentator, "President of Wyandotte College, said in an address tonight that most of the world's ills can be traced to the fact that Man's knowledge of himself has not kept pace with his knowledge of the physical world."

"Hell!" snorted Gramps. "We said that a hundred years ago!"

"In Chicago tonight," the commentator went on, "a special celebration is taking place in the Chicago Lying-in Hospital. The guest of honor is Lowell W. Hitz, age zero. Hitz, born this morning, is the twenty-five-millionth child to be born in the hospital." The commentator faded, and was replaced on the screen by young Hitz, who squalled furiously.

"Hell!" whispered Lou to Emerald. "We said that a hundred years ago."

"I heard that!" shouted Gramps. He snapped off the television set and his petrified descendants stared silently at the screen. "You, there, boy--"

"I didn't mean anything by it, sir," said Lou, aged 103.

"Get me my will. You know where it is. You kids all know where it is. Fetch, boy!" Gramps snapped his gnarled fingers sharply.

Lou nodded dully and found himself going down the hall, picking his way over bedding to Gramps' room, the only private room in the Ford apartment. The other rooms were the bathroom, the living room and the wide windowless hallway, which was originally intended to serve as a dining area, and which had a kitchenette in one end. Six mattresses and four sleeping bags were dispersed in the hallway and living room, and the daybed, in the living room, accommodated the eleventh couple, the favorites of the moment.

On Gramps' bureau was his will, smeared, dog-eared, perforated and blotched with hundreds of additions, deletions, accusations, conditions, warnings, advice and homely philosophy. The document was, Lou reflected, a fifty-year diary, all jammed onto two sheets--a garbled, illegible log of day after day of strife. This day, Lou would be disinherited for the eleventh time, and it would take him perhaps six months of impeccable behavior to regain the promise of a share in the estate. To say nothing of the daybed in the living room for Em and himself.

"Boy!" called Gramps.

"Coming, sir." Lou hurried back into the living room and handed Gramps the will.
"Pen!" said Gramps.

* * * * *

He was instantly offered eleven pens, one from each couple.

"Not that leaky thing," he said, brushing Lou's pen aside. "Ah, there's a nice one. Good boy, Willy." He accepted Willy's pen. That was the tip they had all been waiting for. Willy, then--Lou's father--was the new favorite.

Willy, who looked almost as young as Lou, though he was 142, did a poor job of concealing his pleasure. He glanced shyly at the daybed, which would become his, and from which Lou and Emerald would have to move back into the hall, back to the worst spot of all by the bathroom door.

Gramps missed none of the high drama he had authored and he gave his own familiar role everything he had. Frowning and running his finger along each line, as though he were seeing the will for the first time, he read aloud in a deep portentous monotone, like a bass note on a cathedral organ.

"I, Harold D. Ford, residing in Building 257 of Alden Village, New York City, Connecticut, do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament, revoking any and all former wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made." He blew his nose importantly and went on, not missing a word, and repeating many for emphasis--repeating in particular his ever-more-elaborate specifications for a funeral.

At the end of these specifications, Gramps was so choked with emotion that Lou thought he might have forgotten why he'd brought out the will in the first place. But Gramps heroically brought his powerful emotions under control and, after erasing for a full minute, began to write and speak at the same time. Lou could have spoken his lines for him, he had heard them so often.

"I have had many heartbreaks ere leaving this vale of tears for a better land," Gramps said and wrote. "But the deepest hurt of all has been dealt me by--" He looked around the group, trying to remember who the malefactor was.

Everyone looked helpfully at Lou, who held up his hand resignedly.

Gramps nodded, remembering, and completed the sentence--"my great-grandson, Louis J. Ford."

"Grandson, sir," said Lou.

"Don't quibble. You're in deep enough now, young man," said Gramps, but he made the change. And, from there, he went without a misstep through the phrasing of the disinheritance, causes for which were disrespectfulness and quibbling.

* * * * *

In the paragraph following, the paragraph that had belonged to everyone in the room at one time or another, Lou's name was scratched out and Willy's substituted as heir to the apartment and, the biggest plum of all, the double bed in the private bedroom.

"So!" said Gramps, beaming. He erased the date at the foot of the will and substituted a new one, including the time of day. "Well--time to watch the McGarvey Family." The McGarvey Family was a television serial that Gramps had been following since he was 60, or for a total of 112 years. "I can't wait to see what's going to happen next," he said.

Lou detached himself from the group and lay down on his bed of pain by the bathroom door. Wishing Em would join him, he wondered where she was.

He dozed for a few moments, until he was disturbed by someone stepping over him to get into the bathroom. A moment later, he heard a faint gurgling sound, as though something were being poured down the washbasin drain. Suddenly, it entered his mind that Em had cracked up, that she was in there doing something drastic about Gramps.

"Em?" he whispered through the panel. There was no reply, and Lou pressed against the door. The worn lock, whose bolt barely engaged its socket, held for a second, then let the door swing inward.

"Morty!" gasped Lou.

Lou's great-grandnephew, Mortimer, who had just married and brought his wife home to the Ford menage, looked at Lou with consternation and surprise. Morty kicked the door shut, but not before Lou had glimpsed what was in his hand--Gramps' enormous economy-size bottle of anti-gerasone, which had apparently been half-emptied, and which Morty was refilling with tap water.

A moment later, Morty came out, glared defiantly at Lou and brushed past him wordlessly to rejoin his pretty bride.

Shocked, Lou didn't know what to do. He couldn't let Gramps take the mousetrapped anti-gerasone--but, if he warned Gramps about it, Gramps would certainly make life in the apartment, which was merely insufferable now, harrowing.

Lou glanced into the living room and saw that the Fords, Emerald among them, were momentarily at rest, relishing the botches that the McGarveys had made of their lives. Stealthily, he went into the bathroom, locked the door as well as he could and began to pour the contents of Gramps' bottle down the drain. He was going to refill it with full-strength anti-gerasone from the 22 smaller bottles on the shelf.
The bottle contained a half-gallon, and its neck was small, so it seemed to Lou that the emptying would take forever. And the almost imperceptible smell of anti-gerasone, like Worcestershire sauce, now seemed to Lou, in his nervousness, to be pouring out into the rest of the apartment, through the keyhole and under the door.

* * * * *

The bottle gurgled monotonously. Suddenly, up came the sound of music from the living room and there were murmurs and the scraping of chair-legs on the floor. "Thus ends," said the television announcer, "the 29,121st chapter in the life of your neighbors and mine, the McGarveys." Footsteps were coming down the hall. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

"Just a sec," Lou cheerily called out. Desperately, he shook the big bottle, trying to speed up the flow. His palms slipped on the wet glass, and the heavy bottle smashed on the tile floor.

The door was pushed open, and Gramps, dumbfounded, stared at the incriminating mess.

Lou felt a hideous prickling sensation on his scalp and the back of his neck. He grinned engagingly through his nausea and, for want of anything remotely resembling a thought, waited for Gramps to speak.

"Well, boy," said Gramps at last, "looks like you've got a little tidying up to do."

And that was all he said. He turned around, elbowed his way through the crowd and locked himself in his bedroom.

The Fords contemplated Lou in incredulous silence a moment longer, and then hurried back to the living room, as though some of his horrible guilt would taint them, too, if they looked too long. Morty stayed behind long enough to give Lou a quizzical, annoyed glance. Then he also went into the living room, leaving only Emerald standing in the doorway.

Tears streamed over her cheeks. "Oh, you poor lamb--please don't look so awful! It was my fault. I put you up to this with my nagging about Gramps."

"No," said Lou, finding his voice, "really you didn't. Honest, Em, I was just--"

"You don't have to explain anything to me, hon. I'm on your side, no matter what." She kissed him on one cheek and whispered in his ear, "It wouldn't have been murder, hon. It wouldn't have killed him. It wasn't such a terrible thing to do. It just would have fixed him up so he'd be able to go any time God decided He wanted him."

"What's going to happen next, Em?" said Lou hollowly. "What's he going to do?"

* * * * *

Lou and Emerald stayed fearfully awake almost all night, waiting to see what Gramps was going to do. But not a sound came from the sacred bedroom. Two hours before dawn, they finally dropped off to sleep.

At six o'clock, they arose again, for it was time for their generation to eat breakfast in the kitchenette. No one spoke to them. They had twenty minutes in which to eat, but their reflexes were so dulled by the bad night that they had hardly swallowed two mouthfuls of egg-type processed seaweed before it was time to surrender their places to their son's generation.

Then, as was the custom for whoever had been most recently disinherited, they began preparing Gramps' breakfast, which would presently be served to him in bed, on a tray. They tried to be cheerful about it. The toughest part of the job was having to handle the honest-to-God eggs and bacon and oleomargarine, on which Gramps spent so much of the income from his fortune.

"Well," said Emerald, "I'm not going to get all panicky until I'm sure there's something to be panicky about."

"Maybe he doesn't know what it was I busted," Lou said hopefully.

"Probably thinks it was your watch crystal," offered Eddie, their son, who was toying apathetically with his buckwheat-type processed sawdust cakes.

"Don't get sarcastic with your father," said Em, "and don't talk with your mouth full, either."

"I'd like to see anybody take a mouthful of this stuff and not say something," complained Eddie, who was 73.

He glanced at the clock. "It's time to take Gramps his breakfast, you know."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" said Lou weakly. He shrugged. "Let's have the tray, Em."

"We'll both go."

Walking slowly, smiling bravely, they found a large semi-circle of long-faced Fords standing around the bedroom door.

Em knocked. "Gramps," she called brightly, "break-fast is rea-dy."

There was no reply and she knocked again, harder.

The door swung open before her fist. In the middle of the room, the soft, deep, wide, canopied bed, the symbol of the sweet by-and-by to every Ford, was empty.

A sense of death, as unfamiliar to the Fords as Zoroastrianism or the causes of the Sepoy Mutiny, stilled every voice, slowed every heart. Awed, the heirs began to search gingerly, under the furniture and behind the drapes, for all that was mortal of Gramps, father of the clan.
But Gramps had left not his Earthly husk but a note, which Lou finally found on the dresser, under a paperweight which was a treasured souvenir from the World's Fair of 2000. Unsteadily, Lou read it aloud:

"'Somebody who I have sheltered and protected and taught the best I know how all these years last night turned on me like a mad dog and diluted my anti-gerasone, or tried to. I am no longer a young man. I can no longer bear the crushing burden of life as I once could. So, after last night's bitter experience, I say good-by. The cares of this world will soon drop away like a cloak of thorns and I shall know peace. By the time you find this, I will be gone.'"

"Gosh," said Willy brokenly, "he didn't even get to see how the 5000-mile Speedway Race was going to come out."

"Or the Solar Series," Eddie said, with large mournful eyes.

"Or whether Mrs. McGarvey got her eyesight back," added Morty.

"There's more," said Lou, and he began reading aloud again: "'I, Harold D. Ford, etc., do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament, revoking any and all former wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made.'"

"No!" cried Willy. "Not another one!"

"'I do stipulate,'" read Lou, "'that all of my property, of whatsoever kind and nature, not be divided, but do devise and bequeath it to be held in common by my issue, without regard for generation, equally, share and share alike.'"

"Issue?" said Emerald.

Lou included the multitude in a sweep of his hand. "It means we all own the whole damn shootin' match."

Each eye turned instantly to the bed.

"Share and share alike?" asked Morty.

"Actually," said Willy, who was the oldest one present, "it's just like the old system, where the oldest people head up things with their headquarters in here and--"

"I like that!" exclaimed Em. "Lou owns as much of it as you do, and I say it ought to be for the oldest one who's still working. You can snooze around here all day, waiting for your pension check, while poor Lou stumbles in here after work, all tuckered out, and--"

"How about letting somebody who's never had any privacy get a little crack at it?" Eddie demanded hotly. "Hell, you old people had plenty of privacy back when you were kids. I was born and raised in the middle of that goddamn barracks in the hall! How about--"

"Yeah?" challenged Morty. "Sure, you've all had it pretty tough, and my heart bleeds for you. But try honeymooning in the hall for a real kick."

"Silence!" shouted Willy imperiously. "The next person who opens his mouth spends the next sixth months by the bathroom. Now clear out of my room. I want to think."

A vase shattered against the wall, inches above his head.

In the next moment, a free-for-all was under way, with each couple battling to eject every other couple from the room. Fighting coalitions formed and dissolved with the lightning changes of the tactical situation. Em and Lou were thrown into the hall, where they organized others in the same situation, and stormed back into the room.

After two hours of struggle, with nothing like a decision in sight, the cops broke in, followed by television cameramen from mobile units.

For the next half-hour, patrol wagons and ambulances hauled away Fords, and then the apartment was still and spacious.

An hour later, films of the last stages of the riot were being televised to 500,000,000 delighted viewers on the Eastern Seaboard.

In the stillness of the three-room Ford apartment on the 76th floor of Building 257, the television set had been left on. Once more the air was filled with the cries and grunts and crashes of the fray, coming harmlessly now from the loudspeaker.

The battle also appeared on the screen of the television set in the police station, where the Fords and their captors watched with professional interest.

Em and Lou, in adjacent four-by-eight cells, were stretched out peacefully on their cots.

"Em," called Lou through the partition, "you got a washbasin all your own, too?"

"Sure. Washbasin, bed, light--the works. And we thought Gramps' room was something. How long has this been going on?" She held out her hand. "For the first time in forty years, hon, I haven't got the shakes--look at me!"

"Cross your fingers," said Lou. "The lawyer's going to try to get us a year."

"Gee!" Em said dreamily. "I wonder what kind of wires you'd have to pull to get put away in solitary."
"All right, pipe down," said the turnkey, "or I'll toss the whole kit and caboodle of you right out. And first one who lets on to anybody outside how good jail is ain't never getting back in!"

The prisoners instantly fell silent.

The living room of the apartment darkened for a moment as the riot scenes faded on the television screen, and then the face of the announcer appeared, like the Sun coming from behind a cloud. "And now, friends," he said, "I have a special message from the makers of anti-gerasone, a message for all you folks over 150. Are you hampered socially by wrinkles, by stiffness of joints and discoloration or loss of hair, all because these things came upon you before anti-gerasone was developed? Well, if you are, you need no longer suffer, need no longer feel different and out of things.

"After years of research, medical science has now developed Super-anti-gerasone! In weeks--yes, weeks--you can look, feel and act as young as your great-great-grandchildren! Wouldn't you pay $5,000 to be indistinguishable from everybody else? Well, you don't have to. Safe, tested Super-anti-gerasone costs you only a few dollars a day.

"Write now for your free trial carton. Just put your name and address on a dollar postcard, and mail it to 'Super,' Box 500,000, Schenectady, N. Y. Have you got that? I'll repeat it. 'Super,' Box 500,000 ..."

Underlining the announcer's words was the scratching of Gramps' pen, the one Willy had given him the night before. He had come in, a few minutes earlier, from the Idle Hour Tavern, which commanded a view of Building 257 from across the square of asphalt known as the Alden Village Green. He had called a cleaning woman to come straighten the place up, then had hired the best lawyer in town to get his descendants a conviction, a genius who had never gotten a client less than a year and a day. Gramps had then moved the daybed before the television screen, so that he could watch from a reclining position. It was something he'd dreamed of doing for years.

"Schen-ec-ta-dy," murmured Gramps. "Got it!" His face had changed remarkably. His facial muscles seemed to have relaxed, revealing kindness and equanimity under what had been taut lines of bad temper. It was almost as though his trial package of Super-anti-gerasone had already arrived. When something amused him on television, he smiled easily, rather than barely managing to lengthen the thin line of his mouth a millimeter.

Life was good. He could hardly wait to see what was going to happen next.

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**Contents**

THE CHRONIC ARGONAUTS

by H. G. Wells

Being the Account of Dr. Nebogipfel's Sojourn in Llyddwdd

About half-a-mile outside the village of Llyddwdd by the road that goes up over the eastern flank of the mountain called Pen-y-pwll to Rwsstog is a large farm-building known as the Manse. It derives this title from the fact that it was at one time the residence of the minister of the Calvinistic Methodists. It is a quaint, low, irregular erection, lying back some hundred yards from the railway, and now fast passing into a ruinous state.

Since its construction in the latter half of the last century this house has undergone many changes of fortune, having been abandoned long since by the farmer of the surrounding acres for less pretentious and more commodious headquarters. Among others Miss Carnot, "the Gallic Sappho" at one time made it her home, and later on an old man named Williams became its occupier. The foul murder of this tenant by his two sons was the cause of its remaining for some considerable period uninhabited; with the inevitable consequence of its undergoing very extensive dilapidation.

The house had got a bad name, and adolescent man and Nature combined to bring swift desolation upon it. The fear of the Williamses which kept the Llyddwdd lads from gratifying their propensity to invade its deserted interior, manifested itself in unusually destructive resentment against its external breakables. The missiles with which they at once confessed and defied their spiritual dread, left scarcely a splinter of glass, and only battered relics of the old-fashioned leaden frames, in its narrow windows, while numberless shattered tiles about the house, and four or five black apertures yawning behind the naked rafters in the roof, also witnessed vividly to the energy of their rejection. Rain and wind thus had free way to enter the empty rooms and work their will there, old Time aiding and abetting. Alternately soaked and desiccated, the planks of flooring and wainscot warped apart strangely, split here and there, and tore themselves away in paroxysms of rheumatic pain from the rust-devoured nails that had once held them firm. The plaster of walls and ceiling, growing green-black with a rain-fed crust of lowly life, parted slowly from the
fermenting laths; and large fragments thereof falling down inexplicably in tranquil hours, with loud concussion and clatter, gave strength to the popular superstition that old Williams and his sons were fated to re-enact their fearful tragedy until the final judgment. White roses and daedal creepers, that Miss Carnot had first adorned the walls with, spread now luxuriantly over the lichen-filmed tiles of the roof, and in slender graceful sprays timidly invaded the ghostly cobweb-draped apartments. Fungi, sickly pale, began to displace and uplift the bricks in the cellar floor; while on the roting wood everywhere they clustered, in all the glory of the purple and mottled crimson, yellow-brown and hepatic. Woodlice and ants, beetles and moths, winged and creeping things innumerable, found each day a more congenial home among the ruins; and after them in ever-increasing multitudes swarmed the blotchy toads. Swallows and martins built every year more thickly in the silent, airy, upper chambers. Bats and owls struggled for the crepuscular corners of the lower rooms. Thus, in the Spring of the year eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, was Nature taking over, gradually but certainly, the tenancy of the old Manse. "The house was falling into decay," as men who do not appreciate the application of human derelicts to other beings' use would say, "surely and swiftly." But it was destined nevertheless to shelter another human tenant before its final dissolution.

There was no intelligence of the advent of a new inhabitant in quiet Llyddwdd. He came without a solitary premonition out of the vast unknown into the sphere of minute village observation and gossip. He fell into the Llyddwdd world, as it were, like a thunderbolt falling in the daytime. Suddenly, out of nothingness, he was. Rumour, indeed, vaguely averred that he was seen to arrive by a certain train from London, and to walk straight without hesitation to the old Manse, giving neither explanatory word nor sign to mortal as to his purpose there: but then the same fertile source of information also hinted that he was first beheld skimming down the slopes of steep Pen-y-pwll with exceeding swiftness, riding, as it appeared to the intelligent observer, upon an instrument not unlike a sieve and that he entered the house by the chimney. Of these conflicting reports, the former was the first to be generally circulated, but the latter, in view of the bizarre presence and eccentric ways of the newest inhabitant, obtained wider credence. By whatever means he arrived, there can be no doubt that he was in, and in possession of the Manse, on the first of May; because on the morning of that day he was inspected by Mrs. Morgan ap Lloyd Jones, and subsequently by the numerous persons her report brought up the mountain slope, engaged in the curious occupation of nailing sheet-tin across the void window sockets of his new domicile -- "blinding his house", as Mrs. Morgan ap Lloyd Jones not inaptly termed it.

He was a small-bodied, sallow faced little man, clad in a closefitting garment of some stiff, dark material, which Mr. Parry Davies the Llyddwdd shoemaker, opined was leather. His aquiline nose, thin lips, high cheekridges, and pointed chin, were all small and mutually well proportioned; but the bones and muscles of his face were rendered excessively prominent and distinct by his extreme leanness. The same cause contributed to the sunken appearance of the large eager-looking grey eyes, that gazed forth from under his phenomenally wide and high forehead. It was this latter feature that most powerfully attracted the attention of an observer. It seemed to be great beyond all preconceived ratio to the rest of his countenance. Dimensions, corrugations, wrinkles, venation, were alike abnormally exaggerated. Below it his eyes glowed like lights in some cave at a cliff's foot. It so over-powered and suppressed the rest of his face as to give an unhuman appearance almost, to what would otherwise have been an unquestionably handsome profile. The lank black hair that hung unkempt before his eyes served to increase rather than conceal this effect, by adding to unnatural altitude a suggestion of hydrocephalic projection and the idea of something ultra human was furthermore accentuated by the temporal arteries that pulsed visibly through his transparent yellow skin. No wonder, in view even of these things, that among the highly and over-poetical Cymric of Llyddwdd the sieve theory of arrival found considerable favour.

It was his bearing and actions, however, much more than his personality, that won over believers to the warlock notion of matters. In almost every circumstance of life the observant villagers soon found his ways were not only not their ways, but altogether inexplicable upon any theory of motives they could conceive. Thus, in a small matter at the beginning, when Arthur Price Williams, eminent and famous in every tavern in Caernarvonshire for his social gifts, endeavoured, in choicest Welsh and even choicer English, to inveigle the stranger into conversation over the sheet-tin performance, he failed utterly. Inquisitional supposition, straightforward enquiry, offer of assistance, suggestion of method, sarcasm, irony, abuse, and at last, gage of battle, though shouted with much effort from the road hedge, went unanswered and apparently unheard. Missile weapons, Arthur Price Williams found, were equally unavailing for the purpose of introduction, and the gathered crowd dispersed with unappeased curiosity and suspicion. Later in the day, the swarth apparition was seen striding down the mountain road towards the village, hatless, and with such swift width of step and set resolution of countenance, that Arthur Price Williams, beholding him from afar from the Pig and Whistle doorway was seized with dire consternation, and hid behind the Dutch oven in the kitchen till he was past. Wild panic also smote the school-house as the children were coming out, and drove them indoors like leaves before a gale. He was merely seeking the provision shop, however, and erupted thencefrom after a prolonged stay, loaded with a various armful of blue parcels, a loaf, herrings, pigs' trotters, salt pork, and a
black battle, with which he returned in the same swift projectile gait to the Manse. His way of shopping was to name, and to name simply, without solitary other word of explanation, civility or request, the article he required.

The shopkeeper's crude meteorological superstitions and inquisitive commonplaces, he seemed not to hear, and he might have been esteemed deaf if he had not evinced the promptest attention to the faintest relevant remark. Consequently it was speedily rumoured that he was determined to avoid all but the most necessary human intercourse. He lived altogether mysteriously, in the decaying manse, without mortal service or companionship, presumably sleeping on planks or litter, and either preparing his own food or eating it raw. This, coupled with the popular conception of the haunting patricides, did much to strengthen the popular supposition of some vast gulf between the newcomer and common humanity. The only thing that was inharmonious with this idea of severance from mankind was a constant flux of crates filled with grotesquely contorted glassware, cases of brass and steel instruments, huge coils of wire, vast iron and fire-clay implements, of inconceivable purpose, jars and phials labelled in black and scarlet -- POISON, huge packages of books, and gargantuan rolls of cartridge paper, which set in towards his Llyddwdd quarters from the outer world. The apparently hieroglyphic inscriptions on these various consignments revealed at the profound scrutiny of Pugh Jones that the style and title of the new inhabitant was Dr. Moses Nebogipfel, Ph.D., F.R.S., N.W.R., PAID: at which discovery much edification was felt, especially among the purely Welsh-speaking community. Further than this, these arrivals, by their evident unfitness for any allowable mortal use, and inferential diabolicalness, filled the neighbourhood with a vague horror and lively curiosity, which were greatly augmented by the extraordinary phenomena, and still more extraordinary accounts thereof, that followed their reception in the Manse.

The first of these was on Wednesday, the fifteenth of May, when the Calvinistic Methodists of Llyddwdd had their annual commemoration festival; on which occasion, in accordance with custom, dwellers in the surrounding parishes of Rwstog, Pen-y-garn, Caergyllwdd, Llanrdd, and even distant Llanrwst flocked into the village. Popular thanks to Providence were materialised in the usual way, by means of plum-bread and butter, mixed tea, terza, consecrated flirtations, kiss-in-the-ring, rough-and-tumble football, and vituperative political speechmaking. About half-past eight the fun began to tarnish, and the assembly to break up; and by nine numerous couples and occasional groups were wending their way in the darkling along the hilly Llyddwdd and Rwstog road. It was a calm warm night; one of those nights when lamps, gas and heavy sleep seem stupid ingratitude to the Creator. The zenith sky was an ineffable deep lucent blue, and the evening star hung golden in the liquid darkness of the west. In the north-north-west, a faint phosphorescence marked the sunken day. The moon was just rising, pallid and gibbous over the huge haze-dimmed shoulder of Pen-y-pwll. Against the wan eastern sky, from the vague outline of the mountain slope, the Manse stood out black, clear and solitary. The stillness of the twilight had hushed the myriad murmurs of the day. Only the sounds of footsteps and voices and laughter, that came fitfully rising and falling from the roadway, and an intermittent hammering in the darkened dwelling, broke the silence. Suddenly a strange whizzing, buzzing whirrl filled the night air, and a bright flicker glanced across the dim path of the wayfarers. All eyes were turned in astonishment to the old Manse. The house no longer loomed a black featureless block but was filled to overflowing with light. From the gaping holes in the roof, from chinks and fissures amid tiles and brickwork, from every gap which Nature or man had pierced in the crumbling old shell, a blinding blue-white glare was streaming, beside which the rising moon seemed a disc of opaque sulphur. The thin mist of the dewy night had caught the violet glow and hung, unearthly smoke, over the colourless blaze. A strange turmoil and outcrying in the old Manse now began, and grew ever more audible to the clustering spectators, and therewith came clanging loud impacts against the window-guarding tin. Then from the gleaming roof-gaps of the house suddenly vomited forth a wondrous swarm of heteromorous living things -- swallows, sparrows, martins, owls, bats, insects in visible multitudes, to hang for many minutes a noisy, gyring, spreading cloud over the black gables and chimneys. . . and then slowly to thin out and vanish away in the night.

As this tumult died away the throbbing humming that had first arrested attention grew once more in the listener's hearing, until at last it was the only sound in the long stillness. Presently, however, the road gradually awoke again to the beating and shuffling of feet, as the knots of Rwstog people, one by one, turned their blinking eyes from the dazzling whiteness and, pondering deeply, continued their homeward way.

The cultivated reader will have already discerned that this phenomenon, which sowed a whole crop of uncanny thoughts in the minds of these worthy folk, was simply the installation of the electric light in the Manse. Truly, this last vicissitude of the old house was its strangest one. Its revival to mortal life was like the raising of Lazarus. From that hour forth, by night and day, behind the tin-blinded windows, the tamed lightning illuminated every corner of its quickly changing interior. The almost frenzied energy of the lank-haired, leather-clad little doctor swept away into obscure holes and corners and common destruction, creeper sprays, toadstools, rose leaves, birds' nests, birds' eggs, cobwebs, and all the coatings and lovingly fanciful trimmings with which that maternal old dotard, Dame Nature, had tricked out the decaying house for its lying in state. The magneto-electric apparatus whirred incessantly amid the
vestiges of the wainscoted dining-room, where once the eighteenth-century tenant had piously read morning prayer and eaten his Sunday dinner; and in the place of his sacred symbolical sideboard was a nasty heap of coke. The oven of the bakehouse supplied substratum and material for a forge, whose snorting, panting bellows, and intermittent, ruddy spark-laden blast made the benighted, but Bible-lit Welsh women murmur in liquid Cymric, as they hurried by: "Whose breath kindleth coals, and out of his mouth is a flame of fire." For the idea these good people formed of it was that a tame, but occasionally restive, leviathan had been added to the terrors of the haunted house. The constantly increasing accumulation of pieces of machinery, big brass castings, block tin, casks, crates, and packages of innumerable articles, by their demands for space, necessitated the sacrifice of most of the slighter partitions of the house, and the beams and flooring of the upper chambers were also mercilessly sawn away by the tireless scientist in such a way as to convert them into mere shelves and corner brackets of the atrial space between cellars and rafters. Some of the sounder planking was utilised in the making of a rude broad table, upon which files and heaps of geometrical diagrams speedily accumulated. The production of these latter seemed to be the object upon which the mind of Dr. Nebogipfel was so inflexibly set. All other circumstances of his life were made entirely subsidiary to this one occupation. Strangely complicated traceries of lines they were -- plans, elevations, sections by surfaces and solids, that, with the help of logarithmic mechanical apparatus and involved curvigraphical machines, spread swiftly under his expert hands over yard after yard of paper. Some of these symbolised shapes he despatched to London, and they presently returned, realised, in forms of brass and ivory, and nickel and mahogany. Some of them he himself translated into solid models of metal and wood; occasionally casting the metallic ones in moulds of sand, but often laboriously hewing them out of the block for greater precision of dimension. In this second process, among other appliances, he employed a steel circular saw set with diamond powder and made to rotate with extraordinary swiftness, by means of steam and multiplying gear. It was this latter thing, more than all else, that filled Llyddwd with a sickly loathing of the Doctor as a man of blood and darkness. Often in the silence of midnight -- for the newest inhabitant heeded the sun but little in his incessant research -- the awakened dwellers around Pen-y-pwll would hear, what was at first a complaining murmur, like the groaning of a wounded man, "gurr-urrurr-URR", rising by slow gradations in pitch and intensity to the likeness of a voice in despairing passionate protest, and at last ending abruptly in a sharp piercing shriek that rang in the ears for hours afterwards and begot numberless gruesome dreams.

The mystery of all these unearthly noises and inexplicable phenomena, the Doctor's inhumanly brusque bearing and evident uneasiness when away from his absorbing occupation, his entire and jealous seclusion, and his terrifying behaviour to certain officious intruders, roused popular resentment and curiously to the highest, and a plot was already on foot to make some sort of popular inquisition (probably accompanied by an experimental ducking) into his proceedings, when the sudden death of the hunchback Hughes in a fit, brought matters to an unexpected crisis. It happened in broad daylight, in the roadway just opposite the Manse. Half a dozen people witnessed it. The unfortunate creature was seen to fall suddenly and roll about on the pathway, struggling violently, as it appeared to happen in broad daylight, by slow gradations in pitch and intensity to the likeness of a voice in despairing passionate protest, and at last ending abruptly in a sharp piercing shriek that rang in the ears for hours afterwards and begot numberless gruesome dreams.

Owen Thomas, the general practitioner, vainly assured the excited crowd which speedily gathered outside the Pig and Whistle, whither the body had been carried, that death was unquestionably natural. A horrible zymotic suspicion had gone forth that the deceased was the victim of Dr. Nebogipfel's imputed aerial powers. The contagion was with the news that passed like a flash through the village and set all Llyddwd seething with a fierce desire for action against the worker of this iniquity. Downright superstition, which had previously walked somewhat modestly about the village, in the fear of ridicule and the Doctor, now appeared boldly before the sight of all men, clad in the terrible majesty of truth. People who had hitherto kept entire silence as to their fears of the imp-like philosopher suddenly discovered a fearsome pleasure in whispering dread possibilities to kindred souls, and from whispers of possibilities their sympathy-fostered utterances soon developed into unhesitating asserverations in laud and even evident uneasiness when away from his absorbing occupation, his entire and jealous seclusion, and his terrifying behaviour to certain officious intruders, roused popular resentment and curiously to the highest, and a plot was already on foot to make some sort of popular inquisition (probably accompanied by an experimental ducking) into his proceedings, when the sudden death of the hunchback Hughes in a fit, brought matters to an unexpected crisis. It happened in broad daylight, in the roadway just opposite the Manse. Half a dozen people witnessed it. The unfortunate creature was seen to fall suddenly and roll about on the pathway, struggling violently, as it appeared to
By eight o'clock (it was Monday the twenty-second of July) a grand demonstration had organised itself against the "necromancer". A number of bolder hearts among the men formed the nucleus of the gathering, and at nightfall Arthur Price Williams, John Peters, and others brought torches and raised their spark-raining flames aloft with curt ominous suggestions. The less adventurous village manhood came straggling late to the rendezvous, and with them the married women came in groups of four or five, greatly increasing the excitement of the assembly with their shrill hysterical talk and active imaginations. After these the children and young girls, overcome by undefinable dread, crept quietly out of the too silent and shadowy houses into the yellow glare of the pine knots, and the tumultuary noise of the thickening people. By nine, nearly half the Llyddwdd population was massed before the Pig and Whistle. There was a confused murmur of many tongues, but above all the stir and chatter of the growing crowd could be heard the coarse, cracked voice of the blood-thirsty old fanatic, Pritchard, drawing a congenial lesson from the fate of the four hundred and fifty idolators of Carmel.

Just as the church clock was beating out the hour, an occultly originated movement up hill began, and soon the whole assembly, men, women, and children, was moving in a fear-compacted mass, towards the ill-fated doctor's abode. As they left the brightly-lit public house behind them, a quavering female voice began singing one of those grim-sounding canticles that so satisfy the Calvinistic ear. In a wonderfully short time, the tune had been caught up, first by two or three, and then by the whole procession, and the manifold shuffling of heavy shoon grew swiftly into rhythm with the beats of the hymn. When, however, their goal rose, like a blazing star, over the undulation of the road, the volume of the chanting suddenly died away, leaving only the voices of the ringleaders, shouting indeed now somewhat out of tune, but, if anything, more vigorously than before. Their persistence and example nevertheless failed to prevent a perceptible breaking and slackening of the pace, as the Manse was neared, and when the gate was reached, the whole crowd came to a dead halt. Vague fear for the future had begotten the courage that had brought the villagers thus far: fear for the present now smothered its kindred birth. The intense blaze from the gaps in the death-like silent pile lit up rows of livid, hesitating faces: and a smothered, frightened sobbing broke out among the children. "Well," said Arthur Price Williams, addressing Jack Peters, with an expert assumption of the modest discipleship, "what do we do now, Jack?" But Peters was regarding the Manse with manifest dubiety, and ignored the question. The Llyddwdd witch-find seemed to be suddenly aborting.

At this juncture old Pritchard suddenly pushed his way forward, gesticulating weirdly with his bony hands and long arms. "What!" he shouted, in broken notes, "fear ye to smite when the Lord hateth? Burn the warlock!" And seizing a flambeau from Peters, he flung open the rickety gate and strode on down the drive, his torch leaving a coiling trail of scintillant sparks on the night wind. "Burn the warlock," screamed a shrill voice from the wavering crowd, and in a moment the gregarious human instinct had prevailed. With an outburst of incoherent, threatening voice, the mob poured after the fanatic.

Woe betide the Philosopher now! They expected barricaded doors; but with a groan of a conscious insufficiency, the hinge-rusted portals swung at the push of Pritchard. Blinded by the light, he hesitated for a second on the threshold, while his followers came crowding up behind him.

Those who were there say that they saw Dr. Nebogipfel, standing in the toneless electric glare, on a peculiar erection of brass and ebony and ivory; and that he seemed to be smiling at them, half pityingly and half scornfully, as it is said martyrs are wont to smile. Some assert, moreover, that by his side was sitting a tall man, clad in ravenswing, and some even aver that this second man -- whom others deny -- bore on his face the likeness of the Reverend Elijah Ulysses Cook, while others declare that he resembled the description of the murdered Williams. Be that as it may, it must now go unproven for ever, for suddenly a wonderful thing smote the crowd as it swarmed in through the entrance. Pritchard pitched headlong on the floor senseless. While shouts and shrieks of anger, changed in mid utterance to yells of agonising fear, or to the mute gasp of heart-stopping horror: and then a frantic rush was made for the doorway.

For the calm, smiling doctor, and his quiet, black-clad companion, and the polished platform which upbore them, had vanished before their eyes!

How an Esoteric Story Became Possible

A silvery-foliaged willow by the side of a mere. Out of the cress-spangled waters below, rise clumps of sedge-blades, and among them glows the purple fleur-de-lys, and sapphire vapour of forget-me-nots. Beyond is a sluggish stream of water reflecting the intense blue of the moist Fenland sky; and beyond that a low osier-fringed eyot. This limits all the visible universe, save some scattered pollards and spear-like poplars showing against the violet distance. At the foot of the willow reclines the Author watching a copper butterfly fluttering from iris to iris.

Who can fix the colours of the sunset? Who can take a cast of flame? Let him essay to register the mutations of mortal thought as it wanders from a copper butterfly to the disembodied soul, and thence passes to spiritual motions and the vanishing of Dr. Moses Nebogipfel and the Rev. Elijah Ulysses Cook from the world of sense.

As the author lay basking there and speculating, as another once did under the Budh tree, on mystic
transmutations, a presence became apparent. There was a somewhat on the eyot between him and the purple horizon -- an opaque reflecting entity, making itself dimly perceptible by reflection in the water to his averted eyes. He raised them in curious surprise.

What was it?

He stared in stupefied astonishment at the apparition, doubted, blinked, rubbed his eyes, stared again, and believed. It was solid, it cast a shadow, and it upbore two men. There was white metal in it that blazed in the noontide sun like incandescent magnesium, ebony bars that drank in the light, and white parts that gleamed like polished ivory. Yet within it seemed unreal. The thing was not square as a machine ought to be, but all awry: it was twisted and seemed falling over, hanging in two directions, as those queer crystals called triclinic hang; it seemed like a machine that had been crushed or warped; it was suggestive and not confirmatory, like the machine of a disordered dream. The men, too, were dreamlike. One was short, intensely sallow, with a strangely-shaped head, and clad in a garment of dark olive green, the other was, grotesquely out of place, evidently a clergyman of the Established Church, a fair-haired, pale-faced respectable-looking man.

Once more doubt came rushing in on the author. He sprawled back and stared at the sky, rubbed his eyes, stared at the willow wands that hung between him and the blue, closely examined his hands to see if his eyes had any new things to relate about them, and then sat up again and stared at the eyot. A gentle breeze stirred the osiers; a white bird was flapping its way through the lower sky. The machine of the vision had vanished! It was an illusion -- a projection of the subjective -- an assertion of the immateriality of mind. "Yes," interpolated the sceptic faculty, "but how comes it that the clergyman is still there?"

The clergyman had not vanished. In intense perplexity the author examined this black-coated phenomenon as he stood regarding the world with hand-shaded eyes. The author knew the periphery of that eyot by heart, and the question that troubled him was, "Whence?" The clergyman looked as Frenchmen look when they land at Newhaven -- intensely travel-worn; his clothes showed rubbed and seamy in the bright day. When he came to the edge of the island and shouted a question to the author, his voice was broken and trembled. "Yes," answered the author, "it is an island. How did you get there?"

But the clergyman, instead of replying to this asked a very strange question.
He said "Are you in the nineteenth century?" The author made him repeat that question before he replied. "Thank heaven," cried the clergyman rapturously. Then he asked very eagerly for the exact date.

"August the ninth, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven," he repeated after the author. "Heaven be praised!" and sinking down on the eyot so that the sedges hid him, he audibly burst into tears.
Now the author was mightily surprised at all this, and going a certain distance along the mere, he obtained a punt, and getting into it he hastily poled to the eyot where he had last seen the clergyman. He found him lying insensible among the reeds, and carried him in his punt to the house where he lived, and the clergyman lay there insensible for ten days.
Meanwhile, it became known that he was the Rev. Elijah Cook, who had disappeared from Llyddwdd with Dr. Moses Nebogipfel three weeks before.

On August 19th, the nurse called the author out of his study to speak to the invalid. He found him perfectly sensible, but his eyes were strangely bright, and his face was deadly pale. "Have you found out who I am?" he asked.

"You are the Rev. Elijah Ulysses Cook, Master of Arts, of Pembroke College, Oxford, and Rector of Llyddwdd, near Rwstog, in Caernarvon."
He bowed his head. "Have you been told anything of how I came here?"
"I found you among the reeds," I said. He was silent and thoughtful for a while. "I have a deposition to make. Will you take it? It concerns the murder of an old man named Williams, which occurred in 1862, this disappearance of Dr. Moses Nebogipfel, the abduction of a ward in the year 4003 ****."
The author stared.
"The year of our Lord 4003," he corrected. "She would come. Also several assaults on public officials in the years 17,901 and 2."
The author coughed.
"The years 17,901 and 2, and valuable medical, social, and physiographical data for all time."
After a consultation with the doctor, it was decided to have the deposition taken down, and this is which constitutes the remainder of the story of the Chronic Argonauts.

On August 28th, 1887, the Rev Elijah Cook died. His body was conveyed to Llyddwdd, and buried in the churchyard there.

THE ESOTERIC STORY BASED ON THE CLERGYMAN'S DEPOSITIONS
The Anachronic Man
Incidently it has been remarked in the first part, how the Reverend Elijah Ulysses Cook attempted and failed to quiet the superstitious excitement of the villagers on the afternoon of the memorable twenty-second of July. His next proceeding was to try and warn the unsocial philosopher of the dangers which impended. With this intent he made his way from the rumour-pelted village, through the silent, slumbrous heat of the July afternoon, up the slopes of Pen-y-pwll, to the old Manse. His loud knocking at the heavy door called forth dull resonance from the interior, and produced a shower of lumps of plaster and fragments of decaying touchwood from the rickety porch, but beyond this the dreamy stillness of the summer mid-day remained unbroken. Everything was so quiet as he stood there expectant, that the occasional speech of the haymakers a mile away in the fields, over towards Rwstog, could be distinctly heard. The reverend gentleman waited, then knocked again, and waited again, and listened, until the echoes and the patter of rubbish had melted away into the deep silence, and the creeping in the blood-vessels of his ears had become oppressively audible, swelling and sinking with sounds like the confused murmuring of a distant crowd, and causing a suggestion of anxious discomfort to spread slowly over his mind.

Again he knocked, this time loud, quick blows with his stick, and almost immediately afterwards, leaning his hand against the door, he kicked the panels vigorously. There was a shouting of echoes, a protesting jarring of hinges, and then the oaken door yawned and displayed, in the blue blaze of the electric light, vestiges of partitions, piles of planking and straw, masses of metal, heaps of papers and overthrown apparatus, to the rector's astonished eyes. "Doctor Nebogipfel, excuse my intruding," he called out, but the only response was a reverberation among the black beams and shadows that hung dimly above. For almost a minute he stood there, leaning forward over the threshold, staring at the glittering mechanisms, diagrams, books, scattered indiscriminately with broken food, packing cases, heaps of coke, hay, and microcosmic lumber, about the undivided house cavity; and then, removing his hat and treading stealthily, as if the silence were a sacred thing, he stepped into the apparently deserted shelter of the Doctor.

His eyes sought everywhere, as he cautiously made his way through the confusion, with a strange anticipation of finding Nebogipfel hidden somewhere in the sharp black shadows among the litter, so strong in him was an indescribable sense of perceiving presence. This feeling was so vivid that, when, after an abortive exploration, he seated himself upon Nebogipfel's diagram-covered bench, it made him explain in a forced hoarse voice to the stillness -- "He is not here. I have something to say to him. I must wait for him." It was so vivid, too, that the trickling of some grit down the wall in the vacant corner behind him made him start round in a sudden perspiration. There was nothing visible there, but turning his head back, he was stricken rigid with horror by the swift, noiseless apparition of Nebogipfel, ghastly pale, and with red stained hands, crouching upon a strange-looking metallic platform, and with his deep grey eyes looking intently into the visitor's face.

Cook's first impulse was to yell out his fear, but his throat was paralysed, and he could only stare fascinated at the bizarre countenance that had thus clashed suddenly into visibility. The lips were quivering and the breath came in short convulsive sobs. The un-human forehead was wet with perspiration, while the veins were swollen, knotted and purple. The Doctor's red hands, too, he noticed, were trembling, as the hands of slight people tremble after intense muscular exertion, and his lips closed and opened as if he, too, had a difficulty in speaking as he gasped, "Who -- what do you do here?"

Cook answered not a word, but stared with hair erect, open mouth, and dilated eyes, at the dark red unmistakeable smear that streaked the pure ivory and gleaming nickel and shining ebony of the platform.

"What are you doing here?" repeated the doctor, raising himself. "What do you want?"

Cook gave a convulsive effort. "In Heaven's name, what are you?" he gasped; and then black curtains came closing in from every side, sweeping the squatting dwarfish phantasm that reeled before him into rayless, voiceless night.

The Reverend Elijah Ulysses Cook recovered his perceptions to find himself lying on the floor of the old Manse, and Doctor Nebogipfel, no longer blood-stained and with all trace of his agitation gone, kneeling by his side and bending over him with a glass of brandy in his hand. "Do not be alarmed, sir," said the philosopher with a faint smile, as the clergyman opened his eyes. "I have not treated you to a disembodied spirit, or anything nearly so extraordinary . . . may I offer you this?"

The clergyman submitted quietly to the brandy, and then stared perplexed into Nebogipfel's face, vainly searching his memory for what occurrences had preceded his insensibility. Raising himself at last, into a sitting posture, he saw the oblique mass of metals that had appeared with the doctor, and immediately all that happened flashed back upon his mind. He looked from this structure to the recluse, and from the recluse to the structure.

"There is absolutely no deception, sir," said Nebogipfel with the slightest trace of mockery in his voice. "I lay no claim to work in matters spiritual. It is a bona fide mechanical contrivance, a thing emphatically of this sordid world. Excuse me -- just one minute." He rose from his knees, stepped upon the mahogany platform, took a curiously curved lever in his hand and pulled it over. Cook rubbed his eyes. There certainly was no deception. The
doctor and the machine had vanished.

The reverend gentleman felt no horror this time, only a slight nervous shock, to see the doctor presently reappear "in the twinkling of an eye" and get down from the machine. From that he walked in a straight line with his hands behind his back and his face downcast, until his progress was stopped by the intervention of a circular saw; then, turning round sharply on his heel, he said:

"I was thinking while I was . . . away . . . Would you like to come? I should greatly value a companion."

The clergyman was still sitting, hatless, on the floor. "I am afraid," he said slowly, "you will think me stupid ---"

"Not at all," interrupted the doctor. "The stupidity is mine. You desire to have all this explained . . . wish to know where I am going first. I have spoken so little with men of this age for the last ten years or more that I have ceased to make due allowances and concessions for other minds. I will do my best, but that I fear will be very unsatisfactory. It is a long story . . . do you find that floor comfortable to sit on? If not, there is a nice packing case over there, or some straw behind you, or this bench -- the diagrams are done with now, but I am afraid of the drawing pins. You may sit on the Chronic Argo!"

"No, thank you," slowly replied the clergyman, eyeing that deformed structure thus indicated, suspiciously; "I am quite comfortable here."

"Then I will begin. Do you read fables? Modern ones?"

"I am afraid I must confess to a good deal of fiction," said the clergyman deprecatingly. "In Wales the ordained ministers of the sacraments of the Church have perhaps too large a share of leisure ----"

"Have you read the Ugly Duckling?"

"Hans Christian Andersen's -- yes -- in my childhood."

"A wonderful story -- a story that has ever been full of tears and heart swelling hopes for me, since first it came to me in my lonely boyhood and saved me from unspeakable things. That story, if you understand it well, will tell you almost all that you should know of me to comprehend how that machine came to be thought of in a mortal brain. . . . Even when I read that simple narrative for the first time, a thousand bitter experiences had begun the teaching of my isolation among the people of my birth -- I knew the story was for me. The ugly duckling that proved to be a swan, that lived through all contempt and bitterness, to float at last sublime. From that hour forth, I dreamt of meeting with my kind, dream of encountering that sympathy I knew was my profoundest need. Twenty years I lived in that hope, lived and worked, lived and wandered, loved even, and at last, despaired. Only once among all those millions of wondering, astonished, indifferent, contemptuous, and insidious faces that I met with in that passionate wandering, looked one upon me as I desired . . . looked ----"

He paused. The Reverend Cook glanced up into his face, expecting some indication of the deep feeling that had sounded in his last words. It was downcast, clouded, and thoughtful, but the mouth was rigidly firm.

"In short, Mr. Cook, I discovered that I was one of those superior Cagots called a genius -- a man born out of my time -- a man thinking the thoughts of a wiser age, doing things and believing things that men now cannot understand, and that in the years ordained to me there was nothing but silence and suffering for my soul -- unbroken solitude, man's bitterest pain. I knew I was an Anachronic Man; my age was still to come. One filmy hope alone held me to life, a hope to which I clung until it had become a certain thing. Thirty years of unremitting toil and deepest thought among the hidden things of matter and form and life, and then that, the Chronic Argo, the ship that sails through time, and now I go to join my generation, to journey through the ages till my time has come."

The Chronic Argo

Dr. Nebogipfel paused, looked in sudden doubt at the clergyman's perplexed face. "You think that sounds mad," he said, "to travel through time?"

"It certainly jars with accepted opinions," said the clergyman, allowing the faintest suggestion of controversy to appear in his intonation, and speaking apparently to the Chronic Argo. Even a clergyman of the Church of England you see can have a suspicion of illusions at times.

"It certainly does jar with accepted opinions," agreed the philosopher cordially. "It does more than that -- it defies accepted opinions to mortal combat. Opinions of all sorts, Mr. Cook -- Scientific Theories, Laws, Articles of Belief, or, to come to elements, Logical Premises, Ideas, or whatever you like to call them -- all are, from the infinite nature of things, so many diagrammatic caricatures of the ineffable -- caricatures altogether to be avoided save where they are necessary in the shaping of results -- as chalk outlines are necessary to the painter and plans and sections to the engineer. Men, from the exigencies of their being, find this hard to believe."

The Rev. Elijah Ulysses Cook nodded his head with the quiet smile of one whose opponent has unwittingly given a point.

"It is as easy to come to regard ideas as complete reproductions of entities as it is to roll off a log. Hence it is that almost all civilised men believe in the reality of the Greek geometrical conceptions."
"Oh! pardon me, sir," interrupted Cook. "Most men know that a geometrical point has no existence in matter, and the same with a geometrical line. I think you underrate . . ."

"Yes, yes, those things are recognised," said Nebogipfel calmly; "but now . . . a cube. Does that exist in the material universe?"

"Certainly."

"An instantaneous cube?"

"I don't know what you intend by that expression."

"Without any other sort of extension; a body having length, breadth, and thickness, exists?"

"What other sort of extension can there be?" asked Cook, with raised eyebrows.

"Has it never occurred to you that no form can exist in the material universe that has no extension in time? . . . Has it never glimmered upon your consciousness that nothing stood between men and a geometry of four dimensions -- length, breadth, thickness, and duration -- but the inertia of opinion, the impulse from the Levantine philosophers of the bronze age?"

"Putting it that way," said the clergyman, "it does look as though there was a flaw somewhere in the notion of tridimensional being; but" . . . He became silent, leaving that sufficiently eloquent "but" to convey all the prejudice and distrust that filled his mind.

"When we take up this new light of a fourth dimension and reexamine our physical science in its illumination," continued Nebogipfel, after a pause, "we find ourselves no longer limited by hopeless restriction to a certain beat of time -- to our own generation. Locomotion along lines of duration -- chronic navigation comes within the range, first, of geometrical theory, and then of practical mechanics. There was a time when men could only move horizontally and in their appointed country. The clouds floated above them, unattainable things, mysterious chariots of those fearful gods who dwelt among the mountain summits. Speaking practically, men in those days were restricted to motion in two dimensions; and even there circumambient ocean and hypoborean fear bound him in. But those times were to pass away. First, the keel of Jason cut its way between the Symplegades, and then in the fulness of time, Columbus dropped anchor in a bay of Atlantis. Then man burst his bidimensional limits, and invaded the third dimension, soaring with Montgolfier into the clouds, and sinking with a diving bell into the purple treasure-caves of the waters. And now another step, and the hidden past and unknown future are before us. We stand upon a mountain summit with the plains of the ages spread below."

Nebogipfel paused and looked down at his hearer.

The Reverend Elijah Cook was sitting with an expression of strong distrust on his face. Preaching much had brought home certain truths to him very vividly, and he always suspected rhetoric. "Are those things figures of speech," he asked; "or am I to take them as precise statements? Do you speak of travelling through time in the same way as one might speak of Omnipotence making His pathway on the storm, or do you -- a -- mean what you say?"

Dr. Nebogipfel smiled quietly. "Come and look at these diagrams," he said, and then with elaborate simplicity he commenced to explain again to the clergyman the new quadridimensional geometry. Insensibly Cook's aversion passed away, and seeming impossibility grew possible, now that such tangible things as diagrams and models could be brought forward in evidence. Presently he found himself asking questions, and his interest grew deeper and deeper as Nebogipfel slowly and with precise clearness unfolded the beautiful order of his strange invention. The moments slipped away unchecked, as the Doctor passed on to the narrative of his research, and it was with a start of surprise that the clergyman noticed the deep blue of the dying twilight through the open doorway.

"The voyage," said Nebogipfel concluding his history, "will be full of undreamt-of dangers -- already in one brief essay I have stood in the very jaws of death -- but it is also full of the divines' promise of undreamt-of joy. Will you come? Will you walk among the people of the Golden Years? . . ."

But the mention of death by the philosopher had brought flooding back to the mind of Cook, all the horrible sensations of that first apparition.

"Dr. Nebogipfel . . . one question?" He hesitated. "On your hands . . . Was it blood?"

Nebogipfel's countenance fell. He spoke slowly.

"When I had stopped my machine, I found myself in this room as it used to be. 'Evil spirits assailed him,' read the old man; 'but it is written, "to him that overcometh shall be given life eternal". They came as entreating friends, but he endured through all their snares. They came as principalities and powers, but he defied them in the name of the King of Kings. Once even it is told that in his study, while he was translating the New Testament into German, the Evil One himself appeared before him. . .' Just then the lad glanced timorously round, and with a fearful wail fainted away . . ."
"The others sprang at me... It was a fearful grapple... The old man clung to my throat, screaming 'Man or Devil, I defy thee . . .'

"I could not help it. We rolled together on the floor . . . the knife his trembling son had dropped came to my hand . . . Hark!"

He paused and listened, but Cook remained staring at him in the same horror-stricken attitude he had assumed when the memory of the blood-stained hands had rushed back over his mind.

"Do you hear what they are crying? Hark!"

"Burn the warlock! Burn the murderer!"

"Do you hear? There is no time to be lost."

"Slay the murderer of cripples. Kill the devil's claw!"

"Come! Come!"

Cook, with a convulsive effort, made a gesture of repugnance and strode to the doorway. A crowd of black figures roaring towards him in the red torchlight made him recoil. He shut the door and faced Nebogipfel.

The thin lips of the Doctor curled with a contemptuous sneer. "They will kill you if you stay," he said; and seizing his unresisting visitor by the wrist, he forced him towards the glittering machine. Cook sat down and covered his face with his hands.

In another moment the door was flung open, and old Pritchard stood blinking on the threshold.

A pause. A hoarse shout changing suddenly into a sharp shrill shriek.

A thunderous roar like the bursting forth of a great fountain of water.

The voyage of the Chronic Argonauts had begun.

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**Contents**

**THE COSMIC EXPRESS**

By JACK WILLIAMSON

Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding tumbled out of the rumpled bed-clothing, a striking slender figure in purple-striped pajamas. He smiled fondly across to the other of the twin beds, where Nada, his pretty bride, lay quiet beneath light silk covers. With a groan, he stood up and began a series of fantastic bending exercises. But after a few half-hearted movements, he gave it up, and walked through an open door into a small bright room, its walls covered with bookcases and also with scientific appliances that would have been strange to the man of four or five centuries before, when the Age of Aviation was beginning.

Yawning, Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding stood before the great open window, staring out. Below him was a wide, park-like space, green with emerald lawns, and bright with flowering plants. Two hundred yards across it rose an immense pyramidal building--an artistic structure, gleaming with white marble and bright metal, striped with the verdure of terraced roof-gardens, its slender peak rising to help support the gray, steel-ribbed glass roof above. Beyond, the park stretched away in illimitable vistas, broken with the graceful columned buildings that held up the great glass roof.

Above the glass, over this New York of 2432 A. D., a freezing blizzard was sweeping. But small concern was that to the lightly clad man at the window, who was inhaling deeply the fragrant air from the plants below--air kept, winter and summer, exactly at 20° C.

With another yawn, Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding turned back to the room, which was bright with the rich golden light that poured in from the suspended globes of the cold ato-light that illuminated the snow-covered city. With a distasteful grimace, he seated himself before a broad, paper-littered desk, sat a few minutes leaning back, with his hands clasped behind his head. At last he straightened reluctantly, slid a small typewriter out of its drawer, and began pecking at it impatiently.

For Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding was an author. There was a whole shelf of his books on the wall, in bright jackets, red and blue and green, that brought a thrill of pleasure to the young novelist's heart when he looked up from his clattering machine.

He wrote "thrilling action romances," as his enthusiastic publishers and television directors said, "of ages past, when men were men. Red-blooded heroes responding vigorously to the stirring passions of primordial life!"

** * * * * **

He was impartial as to the source of his thrills--provided they were distant enough from modern civilization.
His hero was likely to be an ape-man roaring through the jungle, with a bloody rock in one hand and a beautiful girl in the other. Or a cowboy,"hard-riding, hard-shooting," the vanishing hero of the ancient ranches. Or a man marooned with a lovely woman on a desert South Sea island. His heroes were invariably strong, fearless, resourceful fellows, who could handle a club on equal terms with a cave-man, or call science to aid them in defending a beautiful mate from the terrors of a desolate wilderness.

And a hundred million read Eric's novels, and watched the dramatization of them on the television screens. They thrilled at the simple, romantic lives his heroes led, paid him handsome royalties, and subconsciously shared his opinion that civilization had taken all the best from the life of man.

Eric had settled down to the artistic satisfaction of describing the sensuous delight of his hero in the roasted marrow-bones of a dead mammoth, when the pretty woman in the other room stirred, and presently came tripping into the study, gay and vivacious, and—as her husband of a few months most justly thought—altogether beautiful in a bright silk dressing gown.

Recklessly, he slammed the machine back into its place, and resolved to forget that his next "red-blooded action thriller" was due in the publisher's office at the end of the month. He sprang up to kiss his wife, held her embraced for a long happy moment. And then they went hand in hand, to the side of the room and punched a series of buttons on a panel—a simple way of ordering breakfast sent up the automatic shaft from the kitchens below.

Nada Stokes-Harding was also an author. She wrote poems—"back to nature stuff"—simple lyrics of the sea, of sunsets, of bird songs, of bright flowers and warm winds, of thrilling communion with Nature, and growing things. Men read her poems and called her a genius. Even though the whole world had grown up into a city, the birds were extinct, there were no wild flowers, and no one had time to bother about sunsets.

"Eric, darling," she said, "isn't it terrible to be cooped up here in this little flat, away from the things we both love?"

"Yes, dear. Civilization has ruined the world. If we could only have lived a thousand years ago, when life was simple and natural, when men hunted and killed their meat, instead of drinking synthetic stuff, when men still had the joys of conflict, instead of living under glass, like hot-house flowers."

"If we could only go somewhere—"

"There isn't anywhere to go. I write about the West, Africa, South Sea Islands. But they were all filled up two hundred years ago. Pleasure resorts, sanatoriums, cities, factories."

"If only we lived on Venus! I was listening to a lecture on the television, last night. The speaker said that the Planet Venus is younger than the Earth, that it has not cooled so much. It has a thick, cloudy atmosphere, and low, rainy forests. There's simple, elemental life there—like Earth had before civilization ruined it."

"Yes, Kinsley, with his new infra-red ray telescope, that penetrates the cloud layers of the planet, proved that Venus rotates in about the same period as Earth; and it must be much like Earth was a million years ago."

"Eric, I wonder if we could go there! It would be so thrilling to begin life like the characters in your stories, to get away from this hateful civilization, and live natural lives. Maybe a rocket—"

* * * * *

The young author's eyes were glowing. He skipped across the floor, seized Nada, kissed her ecstatically. "Splendid! Think of hunting in the virgin forest, and bringing the game home to you! But I'm afraid there is no way.—Wait! The Cosmic Express."

"The Cosmic Express?"

"A new invention. Just perfected a few weeks ago, I understand. By Ludwig Von der Valls, the German physicist."

"I've quit bothering about science. It has ruined nature, filled the world with silly, artificial people, doing silly, artificial things."

"But this is quite remarkable, dear. A new way to travel—by ether!"

"By ether!"

"Yes. You know of course that energy and matter are interchangeable terms; both are simply etheric vibration, of different sorts."

"Of course. That's elementary." She smiled proudly. "I can give you examples, even of the change. The disintegration of the radium atom, making helium and lead and energy. And Millikan's old proof that his Cosmic Ray is generated when particles of electricity are united to form an atom."

"Fine! I thought you said you weren't a scientist." He glowed with pride. "But the method, in the new Cosmic Express, is simply to convert the matter to be carried into power, send it out as a radiant beam and focus the beam to convert it back into atoms at the destination."

"But the amount of energy must be terrific—"

"It is. You know short waves carry more energy than long ones. The Express Ray is an electromagnetic
vibration of frequency far higher than that of even the Cosmic Ray, and correspondingly more powerful and more penetrating."

The girl frowned, running slim fingers through golden-brown hair. "But I don't see how they get any recognizable object, not even how they get the radiation turned back into matter."

"The beam is focused, just like the light that passes through a camera lens. The photographic lens, using light rays, picks up a picture and reproduces it again on the plate--just the same as the Express Ray picks up an object and sets it down on the other side of the world.

"An analogy from television might help. You know that by means of the scanning disc, the picture is transformed into mere rapid fluctuations in the brightness of a beam of light. In a parallel manner, the focal plane of the Express Ray moves slowly through the object, progressively, dissolving layers of the thickness of a single atom, which are accurately reproduced at the other focus of the instrument--which might be in Venus!

"But the analogy of the lens is the better of the two. For no receiving instrument is required, as in television. The object is built up of an infinite series of plane layers, at the focus of the ray, no matter where that may be. Such a thing would be impossible with radio apparatus because even with the best beam transmission, all but a tiny fraction of the power is lost, and power is required to rebuild the atoms. Do you understand, dear?"

"Not altogether. But I should worry! Here comes breakfast. Let me butter your toast."

A bell had rung at the shaft. She ran to it, and returned with a great silver tray, laden with dainty dishes, which she set on a little side table. They sat down opposite each other, and ate, getting as much satisfaction from contemplation of each other's faces as from the excellent food. When they had finished, she carried the tray to the shaft, slid it in a slot, and touched a button--thus disposing of the culinary cares of the morning.

"Oh, darling! I'm thrilled to death about the Cosmic Express! If we could go to Venus, to a new life on a new world, and get away from all this hateful conventional society--"

"We can go to their office--it's only five minutes. The chap that operates the machine for the company is a pal of mine. He's not supposed to take passengers except between the offices they have scattered about the world. But I know his weak point--"

Eric laughed, fumbled with a hidden spring under his desk. A small polished object, gleaming silvery, slid down into his hand.

"Old friendship, plus this, would make him--like spinach."

* * * * *

Five minutes later Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding and his pretty wife were in street clothes, light silk tunics of loose, flowing lines--little clothing being required in the artificially warmed city. They entered an elevator and dropped thirty stories to the ground floor of the great building.

There they entered a cylindrical car, with rows of seats down the sides. Not greatly different from an ancient subway car, except that it was air-tight, and was hurled by magnetic attraction and repulsion through a tube exhausted of air, at a speed that would have made an old subway rider gasp with amazement.

In five more minutes their car had whipped up to the base of another building, in the business section, where there was no room for parks between the mighty structures that held the unbroken glass roofs two hundred stories above the concrete pavement.

An elevator brought them up a hundred and fifty stories. Eric led Nada down a long, carpeted corridor to a wide glass door, which bore the words:

COSMIC EXPRESS
stenciled in gold capitals across it.

As they approached, a lean man, carrying a black bag, darted out of an elevator shaft opposite the door, ran across the corridor, and entered. They pushed in after him.

They were in a little room, cut in two by a high brass grill. In front of it was a long bench against the wall, that reminded one of the waiting room in an old railroad depot. In the grill was a little window, with a lazy, brown-eyed youth leaning on the shelf behind it. Beyond him was a great, glittering piece of mechanism, half hidden by the brass. A little door gave access to the machine from the space before the grill.

The thin man in black, whom Eric now recognized as a prominent French heart-specialist, was dancing before the window, waving his bag frantically, raving at the sleepy boy.

"Queek! I have tell you zee truth! I have zee most urgent necessity to go queekly. A patient I have in Paree, zat ees in zee most creitical condition!"

"Hold your horses just a minute, Mister. We got a client in the machine now. Russian diplomat from Moscow to Rio de Janeiro.... Two hundred seventy dollars and eighty cents, please.... Your turn next. Remember this is just an experimental service. Regular installations all over the world in a year.... Ready now. Come on in."
The youth took the money, pressed a button. The door sprang open in the grill, and the frantic physician leaped through it.

"Lie down on the crystal, face up," the young man ordered. "Hands at your sides, don't breathe. Ready!"

He manipulated his dials and switches, and pressed another button.

"Why, hello, Eric, old man!" he cried. "That's the lady you were telling me about? Congratulations!" A bell jangled before him on the panel. "Just a minute. I've got a call."

He punched the board again. Little bulbs lit and glowed for a second. The youth turned toward the half-hidden machine, spoke courteously.

"All right, madam. Walk out. Hope you found the transit pleasant."

"But my Violet! My precious Violet!" a shrill female voice came from the machine. "Sir, what have you done with my darling Violet?"

"I'm sure I don't know, madam. You lost it off your hat?"

"None of your impertinence, sir! I want my dog."

"Ah, a dog. Must have jumped off the crystal. You can have him sent on for three hundred and--"

"Young man, if any harm comes to my Violet--I'll--I'll--I'll appeal to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals!"

"Very good, madam. We appreciate your patronage."

* * * * *

The door flew open again. A very fat woman, puffing angrily, face highly colored, clothing shimmering with artificial gems, waddled pompously out of the door through which the frantic French doctor had so recently vanished. She rolled heavily across the room, and out into the corridor. Shrill words floated back:

"I'm going to see my lawyer! My precious Violet--"

The sallow youth winked. "And now what can I do for you, Eric?"

"We want to go to Venus, if that ray of yours can put us there."

"To Venus? Impossible. My orders are to use the Express merely between the sixteen designated stations, at New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, London, Paris--"

"See here, Charley," with a cautious glance toward the door, Eric held up the silver flask. "For old time's sake, and for this--"

The boy seemed dazed at sight of the bright flask. Then, with a single swift motion, he snatched it out of Eric's hand, and bent to conceal it below his instrument panel.

"Sure, old boy. I'd send you to heaven for that, if you'd give me the micrometer readings to set the ray with. But I tell you, this is dangerous. I've got a sort of television attachment, for focusing the ray. I can turn that on Venus--I've been amusing myself, watching the life there, already. Terrible place. Savage. I can pick a place on high land to set you down. But I can't be responsible for what happens afterward."

"Simple, primitive life is what we're looking for. And now what do I owe you--"

"Oh, that's all right. Between friends. Provided that stuff's genuine! Walk in and lie down on the crystal block. Hands at your sides. Don't move."

The little door had swung open again, and Eric led Nada through. They stepped into a little cell, completely surrounded with mirrors and vast prisms and lenses and electron tubes. In the center was a slab of transparent crystal, eight feet square and two inches thick, with an intricate mass of machinery below it.

Eric helped Nada to a place on the crystal, lay down at her side.

"I think the Express Ray is focused just at the surface of the crystal, from below," he said. "It dissolves our substance, to be transmitted by the beam. It would look as if we were melting into the crystal."

"Ready," called the youth. "Think I've got it for you. Sort of a high island in the jungle. Nothing bad in sight now. But, I say--how're you coming back? I haven't got time to watch you."

"Go ahead. We aren't coming back."

"Gee! What is it? Elopement? I thought you were married already. Or is it business difficulties? The Bears did make an awful raid last night. But you better let me set you down in Hong Kong."

A bell jangled. "So long," the youth called.

Nada and Eric felt themselves enveloped in fire. Sheets of white flame seemed to lap up about them from the crystal block. Suddenly there was a sharp tingling sensation where they touched the polished surface. Then blackness, blankness.

* * * * *

The next thing they knew, the fires were gone from about them. They were lying in something extremely soft and fluid; and warm rain was beating in their faces. Eric sat up, found himself in a mud-puddle. Beside him was Nada, opening her eyes and struggling up, her bright garments stained with black mud.
All about rose a thick jungle, dark and gloomy—and very wet. Palm-like, the gigantic trees were, or fern-like, flinging clouds of feathery green foliage high against a somber sky of unbroken gloom.

They stood up, triumphant.

"At last!" Nada cried. "We're free! Free of that hateful old civilization! We're back to Nature!"

"Yes, we're on our feet now, not parasites on the machines."

"It's wonderful to have a fine, strong man like you to trust in, Eric. You're just like one of the heroes in your books!"

"You're the perfect companion, Nada.... But now we must be practical. We must build a fire, find weapons, set up a shelter of some kind. I guess it will be night, pretty soon. And Charley said something about savage animals he had seen in the television.

"We'll find a nice dry cave, and have a fire in front of the door. And skins of animals to sleep on. And pottery vessels to cook in. And you will find seeds and grown grain."

"But first we must find a flint-bed. We need flint for tools, and to strike sparks to make a fire with. We will probably come across a chunk of virgin copper, too—it's found native."

Presently they set off through the jungle. The mud seemed to be very abundant, and of a most sticky consistence. They sank into it ankle deep at every step, and vast masses of it clung to their feet. A mile they struggled on, without finding where a provident nature had left them even a single fragment of quartz, to say nothing of a mass of pure copper.

"A darned shame," Eric grumbled, "to come forty million miles, and meet such a reception as this!"

Nada stopped. "Eric," she said, "I'm tired. And I don't believe there's any rock here, anyway. You'll have to use wooden tools, sharpened in the fire."

"Probably you're right. This soil seemed to be of alluvial origin. Shouldn't be surprised if the native rock is some hundreds of feet underground. Your idea is better."

"You can make a fire by rubbing sticks together, can't you?"

"It can be done, I'm sure. I've never tried it, myself. We need some dry sticks, first."

They resumed the weary march, with a good fraction of the new planet adhering to their feet. Rain was still falling from the dark heavens in a steady, warm downpour. Dry wood seemed scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth.

"You didn't bring any matches, dear?"

"Matches! Of course not! We're going back to Nature."

"I hope we get a fire pretty soon."

"If dry wood were gold dust, we couldn't buy a hot dog."

"Eric, that reminds me that I'm hungry."

"Eric?" she called softly.

He confessed to a few pangs of his own. They turned their attention to looking for banana trees, and coconut palms, but they did not seem to abound in the Venerian jungle. Even small animals that might have been slain with a broken branch had contrary ideas about the matter.

At last, from sheer weariness, they stopped, and gathered branches to make a sloping shelter by a vast fallen tree-trunk.

"This will keep out the rain—maybe—" Eric said hopefully. "And tomorrow, when it has quit raining—maybe we'll do better."

They crept in, as gloomy night fell without. They lay in each other's arms, the body warmth oddly comforting.

Nada clung against Eric. "What is it, dear?"

"Must be a reptile. Dinosaur, or something of the sort. This world seems to be in about the same state as the Earth when they flourished there.... But maybe it won't find us."

The roar was repeated, nearer. The earth trembled beneath a mighty tread.

"Eric," a thin voice trembled. "Don't you think—it might have been better—You know the old life was not so bad, after all."

"I was just thinking of our rooms, nice and warm and bright, with hot foods coming up the shaft whenever we pushed the button, and the gay crowds in the park, and my old typewriter."

"Eric?" she called softly.
"Yes, dear."
"Don't you wish--we had known better?"
"I do." If he winced at the "we" the girl did not notice.

The roaring outside was closer. And suddenly it was answered by another raucous bellow, at considerable distance, that echoed strangely through the forest. The fearful sounds were repeated, alternately. And always the more distant seemed nearer, until the two sounds were together.

And then an infernal din broke out in the darkness. Bellows. Screams. Deafening shrieks. Mighty splashes, as if struggling Titans had upset oceans. Thunderous crashes, as if they were demolishing forests.

Eric and Nada clung to each other, in doubt whether to stay or to fly through the storm. Gradually the sound of the conflict came nearer, until the earth shook beneath them, and they were afraid to move.

Suddenly the great fallen tree against which they had erected the flimsy shelter was rolled back, evidently by a chance blow from the invisible monsters. The pitiful roof collapsed on the bedraggled humans. Nada burst into tears.

"Oh, if only--if only--"
* * * * *

Suddenly flame lapped up about them, the same white fire they had seen as they lay on the crystal block. Dizziness, insensibility overcame them. A few moments later, they were lying on the transparent table in the Cosmic Express office, with all those great mirrors and prisms and lenses about them.

A bustling, red-faced official appeared through the door in the grill, fairly bubbling apologies.

"So sorry--an accident--inconceivable. I can't see how he got it! We got you back as soon as we could find a focus. I sincerely hope you haven't been injured."

"Why--what--what--"

"Why I happened in, found our operator drunk. I've no idea where he got the stuff. He muttered something about Venus. I consulted the auto-register, and found two more passengers registered here than had been recorded at our other stations. I looked up the duplicate beam coordinates, and found that it had been set on Venus. I got men on the television at once, and we happened to find you.

"I can't imagine how it happened. I've had the fellow locked up, and the 'dry-laws' are on the job. I hope you won't hold us for excessive damages."

"No, I ask nothing except that you don't press charges against the boy. I don't want him to suffer for it in any way. My wife and I will be perfectly satisfied to get back to our apartment."

"I don't wonder. You look like you've been through--I don't know what. But I'll have you there in five minutes. My private car--"
* * * * *

Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding, noted author of primitive life and love, ate a hearty meal with his pretty spouse, after they had washed off the grime of another planet. He spent the next twelve hours in bed.

At the end of the month he delivered his promised story to his publishers, a thrilling tale of a man marooned on Venus, with a beautiful girl. The hero made stone tools, erected a dwelling for himself and his mate, hunted food for her, defended her from the mammoth saurian monsters of the Venerian jungles.

The book was a huge success.
THE END
All Dave Miller wanted to do was commit suicide in peace. He tried, but the things that happened after he'd pulled the trigger were all wrong. Like everyone standing around like statues. No St. Peter, no pearly gate, no pitchforks or halos. He might just as well have saved the bullet!

Dave Miller would never have done it, had he been in his right mind. The Millers were not a melancholy stock, hardly the sort of people you expect to read about in the morning paper who have taken their lives the night before. But Dave Miller was drunk--abominably, roaringly so--and the barrel of the big revolver, as he stood against the sink, made a ring of coldness against his right temple.

Dawn was beginning to stain the frosty kitchen windows. In the faint light, the letter lay a gray square against the drain-board tiles. With the melodramatic gesture of the very drunk, Miller had scrawled across the envelope:

"This is why I did it!"

He had found Helen's letter in the envelope when he staggered into their bedroom fifteen minutes ago--at a quarter after five. As had frequently happened during the past year, he'd come home from the store a little late ... about twelve hours late, in fact. And this time Helen had done what she had long threatened to do. She had left him.

The letter was brief, containing a world of heartbreak and broken hopes.

"I don't mind having to scrimp, Dave. No woman minds that if she feels she is really helping her husband over a rough spot. When business went bad a year ago, I told you I was ready to help in any way I could. But you haven't let me. You quit fighting when things got difficult, and put in all your money and energy on liquor and horses and cards. I could stand being married to a drunkard, Dave, but not to a coward ..."

So she was trying to show him. But Miller told himself he'd show her instead. Coward, eh? Maybe this would teach her a lesson! Hell of a lot of help she'd been! Nag at him every time he took a drink. Holler bloody murder when he put twenty-five bucks on a horse, with a chance to make five hundred. What man wouldn't do those things?

His drug store was on the skids. Could he be blamed for drinking a little too much, if alcohol dissolved the morbid vapors of his mind?

Miller stiffened angrily, and tightened his finger on the trigger. But he had one moment of frank insight just before the hammer dropped and brought the world tumbling about his ears. It brought with it a realization that the whole thing was his fault. Helen was right--he was a coward. There was a poignant ache in his heart. She'd been as loyal as they came, he knew that.

He could have spent his nights thinking up new business tricks, instead of swilling whiskey. Could have gone out of his way to be pleasant to customers, not snap at them when he had a terrific hangover. And even Miller knew nobody ever made any money on the horses--at least, not when he needed it. But horses and whiskey and business had become tragically confused in his mind; so here he was, full of liquor and madness, with a gun to his head.

Then again anger swept his mind clean of reason, and he threw his chin up and gripped the gun tight.

"Run out on me, will she!" he muttered thickly. "Well--this'll show her!"

In the next moment the hammer fell ... and Dave Miller had "shown her."

Miller opened his eyes with a start. As plain as black on white, he'd heard a bell ring--the most familiar sound in the world, too. It was the unmistakable tinkle of his cash register.

"Now, how in hell--" The thought began in his mind; and then he saw where he was.

The cash register was right in front of him! It was open, and on the marble slab lay a customer's five-spot. Miller's glance strayed up and around him.

He was behind the drug counter, all right. There were a man and a girl sipping cokes at the fountain, to his right; the magazine racks by the open door; the tobacco counter across from the fountain. And right before him was a customer.

Good Lord! he thought. Was all this a--a dream?

Sweat oozed out on his clammy forehead. That stuff of Herman's that he had drunk during the game--it had had a rank taste, but he wouldn't have thought anything short of marihuana could produce such hallucinations as he had just had. Wild conjectures came boiling up from the bottom of Miller's being.

How did he get behind the counter? Who was the woman he was waiting on? What--

The woman's curious stare was what jarred him completely into the present. Get rid of her! was his one thought. Then sit down behind the scenes and try to figure it all out.

His hand poised over the cash drawer. Then he remembered he didn't know how much he was to take out of the
Avoiding the woman's glance, he muttered:
"Let's see, now, that was--uh--how much did I say?"
The woman made no answer. Miller cleared his throat, said uncertainly:
"I beg your pardon, ma'am--did I say--seventy-five cents?"
It was just a feeler, but the woman didn't even answer to that. And it was right then that Dave Miller noticed the
deep silence that brooded in the store.

Slowly his head came up and he looked straight into the woman's eyes. She returned him a cool, half-smiling
glance. But her eyes neither blinked nor moved. Her features were frozen. Lips parted, teeth showing a little, the tip
of her tongue was between her even white teeth as though she had started to say "this" and stopped with the syllable
unspoken.

Muscles began to rise behind Miller's ears. He could feel his hair stiffen like filings drawn to a magnet. His
glance struggled to the soda fountain. What he saw there shook him to the core of his being.

The girl who was drinking a coke had the glass to her lips, but apparently she wasn't sipping the liquid. Her boy
friend's glass was on the counter. He had drawn on a cigarette and exhaled the gray smoke. That smoke hung in the
air like a large, elongated balloon with the small end disappearing between his lips. While Miller stared, the smoke
did not stir in the slightest.

There was something unholy, something supernatural, about this scene!

With apprehension rippling down his spine, Dave Miller reached across the cash register and touched the
woman on the cheek. The flesh was warm, but as hard as flint. Tentatively, the young druggist pushed harder;
finally, shoved with all his might. For all the result, the woman might have been a two-ton bronze statue. She neither
budged nor changed expression.

Panic seized Miller. His voice hit a high hysterical tenor as he called to his soda-jerker.
"Pete! Pete!" he shouted. "What in God's name is wrong here!"

The blond youngster, with a towel wadded in a glass, did not stir. Miller rushed from the back of the store,
seized the boy by the shoulders, tried to shake him. But Pete was rooted to the spot.

Miller knew, now, that what was wrong was something greater than a hallucination or a hangover. He was in
some kind of trap. His first thought was to rush home and see if Helen was there. There was a great sense of relief
when he thought of her. Helen, with her grave blue eyes and understanding manner, would listen to him and know
what was the matter.

He left the haunted drug store at a run, darted around the corner and up the street to his car. But, though he had
not locked the car, the door resisted his twisting grasp. Shaking, pounding, swearing, Miller wrestled with each of
the doors.

Abruptly he stiffened, as a horrible thought leaped into his being. His gaze left the car and wandered up the
street. Past the intersection, past the one beyond that, on up the thoroughfare until the gray haze of the city dimmed
everything. And as far as Dave Miller could see, there was no trace of motion.

Cars were poised in the street, some passing other machines, some turning corners. A street car stood at a safety
zone; a man who had leaped from the bottom step hung in space a foot above the pavement. Pedestrians paused with
one foot up. A bird hovered above a telephone pole, its wings glued to the blue vault of the sky.

With a choked sound, Miller began to run. He did not slacken his pace for fifteen minutes, until around him
were the familiar, reassuring trees and shrub-bordered houses of his own street. But yet how strange to him!

The season was autumn, and the air filled with brown and golden leaves that tossed on a frozen wind. Miller
ran by two boys lying on a lawn, petrified into a modern counterpart of the sculptor's "The Wrestlers." The sweetish
tang of burning leaves brought a thrill of terror to him; for, looking down an alley from whence the smoke drifted,
he saw a man tending a fire whose leaping flames were red tongues that did not move.

Sobbing with relief, the young druggist darted up his own walk. He tried the front door, found it locked, and
jammed a thumb against the doorbell. But of course the little metal button was as immovable as a mountain. So in
the end, after convincing himself that the key could not be inserted into the lock, he sprang toward the back.

The screen door was not latched, but it might as well have been the steel door of a bank vault. Miller began to
 pound on it, shouting:
"Helen! Helen, are you in there? My God, dear, there's something wrong! You've got to--"

The silence that flowed in again when his voice choked off was the dead stillness of the tomb. He could hear
his voice rustling through the empty rooms, and at last it came back to him like a taunt: "Helen! Helen!"

For Dave Miller, the world was now a planet of death on which he alone lived and moved and spoke.
Staggered, utterly beaten, he made no attempt to break into his home. But he did stumble around to the kitchen window and try to peer in, anxious to see if there was a body on the floor. The room was in semi-darkness, however, and his straining eyes made out nothing.

He returned to the front of the house, shambling like a somnambulist. Seated on the porch steps, head in hands, he slipped into a hell of regrets. He knew now that his suicide had been no hallucination. He was dead, all right; and this must be hell or purgatory.

Bitterly he cursed his drinking, that had led him to such a mad thing as suicide. Suicide! He--Dave Miller--a coward who had taken his own life! Miller's whole being was crawling with revulsion. If he just had the last year to live over again, he thought fervently.

And yet, through it all, some inner strain kept trying to tell him he was not dead. This was his own world, all right, and essentially unchanged. What had happened to it was beyond the pale of mere guesswork. But this one thing began to be clear: This was a world in which change or motion of any kind was a foreigner.

* * * * *

Fire would not burn and smoke did not rise. Doors would not open, liquids were solid. Miller's stubbing toe could not move a pebble, and a blade of grass easily supported his weight without bending. In other words, Miller began to understand, change had been stopped as surely as if a master hand had put a finger on the world's balance wheel.

Miller's ramblings were terminated by the consciousness that he had an acute headache. His mouth tasted, as Herman used to say after a big night, as if an army had camped in it. Coffee and a bromo were what he needed.

But it was a great awakening to him when he found a restaurant and learned that he could neither drink the coffee nor get the lid off the bromo bottle. Fragrant coffee-steam hung over the glass percolator, but even this steam was as a brick wall to his probing touch. Miller started gloomily to thread his way through the waiters in back of the counter again.

Moments later he stood in the street and there were tears swimming in his eyes.

"Helen!" His voice was a pleading whisper. "Helen, honey, where are you?"

There was no answer but the pitiful palpitation of utter silence. And then, there was movement at Dave Miller's right!

Something shot from between the parked cars and crashed against him; something brown and hairy and soft. It knocked him down. Before he could get his breath, a red, wet tongue was licking his face and hands, and he was looking up into the face of a police dog!

Frantic with joy at seeing another in this city of death, the dog would scarcely let Miller rise. It stood up to plant big paws on his shoulders and try to lick his face. Miller laughed out loud, a laugh with a throaty catch in it.

"Where'd you come from, boy?" he asked. "Won't they talk to you, either? What's your name, boy?"

There was a heavy, brass-studded collar about the animal's neck, and Dave Miller read on its little nameplate: "Major."

"Well, Major, at least we've got company now," was Miller's sigh of relief.

For a long time he was too busy with the dog to bother about the sobbing noises. Apparently the dog failed to hear them, for he gave no sign. Miller scratched him behind the ear.

"What shall we do now, Major? Walk? Maybe your nose can smell out another friend for us."

They had gone hardly two blocks when it came to him that there was a more useful way of spending their time. The library! Half convinced that the whole trouble stemmed from his suicide shot in the head--which was conspicuously absent now--he decided that a perusal of the surgery books in the public library might yield something he could use.

* * * * *

That way they bent their steps, and were soon mounting the broad cement stairs of the building. As they went beneath the brass turnstile, the librarian caught Miller's attention with a smiling glance. He smiled back.

"I'm trying to find something on brain surgery," he explained. "I--"

With a shock, then, he realized he had been talking to himself.

In the next instant, Dave Miller whirled. A voice from the bookcases chuckled:

"If you find anything, I wish you'd let me know. I'm stumped myself!"

From a corner of the room came an elderly, half-bald man with tangled gray brows and a rueful smile. A pencil was balanced over his ear, and a note-book was clutched in his hand.

"You, too!" he said. "I had hoped I was the only one--"

Miller went forward hurriedly to grip his hand.

"I'm afraid I'm not so unselfish," he admitted. "I've been hoping for two hours that I'd run into some other poor
"Quite understandable," the stranger murmured sympathetically. "But in my case it is different. You see--I am responsible for this whole tragic business!"

"You!" Dave Miller gulped the word. "I--I thought--"

The man wagged his head, staring at his note pad, which was littered with jumbled calculations. Miller had a chance to study him. He was tall, heavily built, with wide, sturdy shoulders despite his sixty years. Oddly, he wore a gray-green smock. His eyes, narrowed and intent, looked gimlet-sharp beneath those toothbrush brows of his, as he stared at the pad.

"There's the trouble, right there," he muttered. "I provided only three stages of amplification, whereas four would have been barely enough. No wonder the phase didn't carry through!"

"I guess I don't follow you," Miller faltered. "You mean--something you did--"

"I should think it was something I did!" The baldish stranger scratched his head with the tip of his pencil. "I'm John Erickson--you know, the Wanamaker Institute."

Miller said: "Oh!" in an understanding voice. Erickson was head of Wanamaker Institute, first laboratory of them all when it came to exploding atoms and blazing trails into the wildernesses of science.

* * * * *

Erickson's piercing eyes were suddenly boring into the younger man.

"You've been sick, haven't you?" he demanded.

"Well--no--not really sick." The druggist colored. "I'll have to admit to being drunk a few hours ago, though."

"Drunk--" Erickson stuck his tongue in his cheek, shook his head, scowled. "No, that would hardly do it. There must have been something else. The impulsor isn't that powerful. I can understand about the dog, poor fellow. He must have been run over, and I caught him just at the instant of passing from life to death."

"Oh!" Dave Miller lifted his head, knowing now what Erickson was driving at. "Well, I may as well be frank. I'm--I committed suicide. That's how drunk I was. There hasn't been a suicide in the Miller family in centuries. It took a skinful of liquor to set the precedent."

Erickson nodded wisely. "Perhaps we will find the precedent hasn't really been set! But no matter--" His lifted hand stopped Miller's eager, wondering exclamation. "The point is, young man, we three are in a tough spot, and it's up to us to get out of it. And not only we, but heaven knows how many others the world over!"

"Would you--maybe you can explain to my lay mind what's happened," Miller suggested.

"Of course. Forgive me. You see, Mr.--"

"Miller. Dave Miller."

"Dave it is. I have a feeling we're going to be pretty well acquainted before this is over. You see, Dave, I'm a nut on so-called 'time theories.' I've seen time compared to everything from an entity to a long, pink worm. But I disagree with them all, because they postulate the idea that time is constantly being manufactured. Such reasoning is fantastic!

"Time exists. Not as an ever-growing chain of links, because such a chain would have to have a tail end, if it has a front end; and who can imagine the period when time did not exist? So I think time is like a circular train-track. Unending. We who live and die merely travel around on it. The future exists simultaneously with the past, for one instant when they meet."

* * * * *

Miller's brain was humming. Erickson shot the words at him staccato-fashion, as if they were things known from Great Primer days. The young druggist scratched his head.

"You've got me licked," he admitted. "I'm a stranger here, myself."

"Naturally you can't be expected to understand things I've been all my life puzzling about. Simplest way I can explain it is that we are on a train following this immense circular railway."

"When the train reaches the point where it started, it is about to plunge into the past; but this is impossible, because the point where it started is simply the caboose of the train! And that point is always ahead--and behind--the time-train."

"Now, my idea was that with the proper stimulus a man could be thrust across the diameter of this circular railway to a point in his past. Because of the nature of time, he could neither go ahead of the train to meet the future nor could he stand still and let the caboose catch up with him. But--he could detour across the circle and land farther back on the train! And that, my dear Dave, is what you and I and Major have done--almost."

"Almost?" Miller said hoarsely.

Erickson pursed his lips. "We are somewhere partway across the space between present and past. We are living in an instant that can move neither forward nor back. You and I, Dave, and Major--and the Lord knows how many others the world over--have been thrust by my time impulsor onto a timeless beach of eternity. We have been caught
in time's backwash. Castaways, you might say."

An objection clamored for attention in Miller's mind.

"But if this is so, where are the rest of them? Where is my wife?"

"They are right here," Erickson explained. "No doubt you could see your wife if you could find her. But we see them as statues, because, for us, time no longer exists. But there was something I did not count on. I did not know that it would be possible to live in one small instant of time, as we are doing. And I did not know that only those who are hovering between life and death can deviate from the normal process of time!"

"You mean--we're dead!" Miller's voice was a bitter monotone.

"Obviously not. We're talking and moving, aren't we? But--we are on the fence. When I gave my impulsor the jolt of high power, it went wrong and I think something must have happened to me. At the same instant, you had shot yourself.

"Perhaps, Dave, you are dying. The only way for us to find out is to try to get the machine working and topple ourselves one way or the other. If we fall back, we will all live. If we fall into the present--we may die."

"Either way, it's better than this!" Miller said fervently.

"I came to the library here, hoping to find out the things I must know. My own books are locked in my study. And these--they might be cemented in their places, for all their use to me. I suppose we might as well go back to the lab."

Miller nodded, murmuring: "Maybe you'll get an idea when you look at the machine again."

"Let's hope so," said Erickson grimly. "God knows I've failed so far!"

CHAPTER III

Splendid Sacrifice

It was a solid hour's walk out to West Wilshire, where the laboratory was. The immense bronze and glass doors of Wanamaker Institute were closed, and so barred to the two men. But Erickson led the way down the side.

"We can get in a service door. Then we climb through transoms and ventilators until we get to my lab."

Major frisked along beside them. He was enjoying the action and the companionship. It was less of an adventure to Miller, who knew death might be ahead for the three of them.

Two workmen were moving a heavy cabinet in the side service door. To get in, they climbed up the back of the rear workman, walked across the cabinet, and scaled down the front of the leading man. They went up the stairs to the fifteenth floor. Here they crawled through a transom into the wing marked:

"Experimental. Enter Only By Appointment."

Major was helped through it, then they were crawling along the dark metal tunnel of an air-conditioning ventilator. It was small, and took some wriggling.

In the next room, they were confronted by a stern receptionist on whose desk was a little brass sign, reading:

"Have you an appointment?"

Miller had had his share of experience with receptionists' ways, in his days as a pharmaceutical salesman. He took the greatest pleasure now in lighting his cigarette from a match struck on the girl's nose. Then he blew the smoke in her face and hastened to crawl through the final transom.

John Erickson's laboratory was well lighted by a glass-brick wall and a huge skylight. The sun's rays glinted on the time impulsor.[1] The scientist explained the impulsor in concise terms. When he had finished, Dave Miller knew just as little as before, and the outfit still resembled three transformers in a line, of the type seen on power-poles, connected to a great bronze globe hanging from the ceiling.

"There's the monster that put us in this plight," Erickson grunted. "Too strong to be legal, too weak to do the job right. Take a good look!"

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With his hands jammed in his pockets, he frowned at the complex machinery. Miller stared a few moments; then transferred his interests to other things in the room. He was immediately struck by the resemblance of a transformer in a far corner to the ones linked up with the impulsor.

"What's that?" he asked quickly. "Looks the same as the ones you used over there."

"It is."

"But-- Didn't you say all you needed was another stage of power?"

"That's right."

"Maybe I'm crazy!" Miller stared from impulsor to transformer and back again. "Why don't you use it, then?"

"Using what for the connection?" Erickson's eyes gently mocked him.

"Wire, of course!"

The scientist jerked a thumb at a small bale of heavy copper wire.

"Bring it over and we'll try it."
Miller was halfway to it when he brought up short. Then a sheepish grin spread over his features.
"I get it," he chuckled. "That bale of wire might be the Empire State Building, as far as we're concerned. Forgive my stupidity."

Erickson suddenly became serious.
"I'd like to be optimistic, Dave," he muttered, "but in all fairness to you I must tell you I see no way out of this. The machine is, of course, still working, and with that extra stage of power, the uncertainty would be over. But where, in this world of immovable things, will we find a piece of wire twenty-five feet long?"

There was a warm, moist sensation against Miller's hand, and when he looked down Major stared up at him commiseratingly. Miller scratched him behind the ear, and the dog closed his eyes, reassured and happy. The young druggist sighed, wishing there were some giant hand to scratch him behind the ear and smooth his troubles over.
"And if we don't get out," he said soberly, "we'll starve, I suppose."

"No, I don't think it will be that quick. I haven't felt any hunger. I don't expect to. After all, our bodies are still living in one instant of time, and a man can't work up a healthy appetite in one second. Of course, this elastic-second business precludes the possibility of disease."

"Our bodies must go on unchanged. The only hope I see is--when we are on the verge of madness, suicide. That means jumping off a bridge, I suppose. Poison, guns, knives--all the usual wherewithal--are denied to us."

Black despair closed down on Dave Miller. He thrust it back, forcing a crooked grin.
"Let's make a bargain," he offered. "When we finish fooling around with this apparatus, we split up. We'll only be at each other's throat if we stick together. I'll be blaming you for my plight, and I don't want to. It's my fault as much as yours. How about it?"

John Erickson gripped his hand. "You're all right, Dave. Let me give you some advice. If ever you do get back to the present ... keep away from liquor. Liquor and the Irish never did mix. You'll have that store on its feet again in no time."

"Thanks!" Miller said fervently. "And I think I can promise that nothing less than a whiskey antidote for snake bite will ever make me bend an elbow again!"

For the next couple of hours, despondency reigned in the laboratory. But it was soon to be deposed again by hope.

Despite all of Erickson's scientific training, it was Dave Miller himself who grasped the down-to-earth idea that started them hoping again. He was walking about the lab, jingling keys in his pocket, when suddenly he stopped short. He jerked the ring of keys into his hand.
"Erickson!" he gasped. "We've been blind. Look at this!"

The scientist looked; but he remained puzzled.
"Well--?" he asked skeptically.

"There's our wire!" Dave Miller exclaimed. "You've got keys; I've got keys. We've got coins, knives, wristwatches. Why can't we lay them all end to end--" Erickson's features looked as if he had been electrically shocked.
"You've hit it!" he cried. "If we've got enough!"

With one accord, they began emptying their pockets, tearing off wristwatches, searching for pencils. The finds made a little heap in the middle of the floor. Erickson let his long fingers claw through thinning hair.

"God give us enough! We'll only need the one wire. The thing is plugged in already and only the positive pole has to be connected to the globe. Come on!"

Scooping up the assortment of metal articles, they rushed across the room. With his pocket-knife, Dave Miller began breaking up the metal wrist-watch straps, opening the links out so that they could be laid end-to-end for the greatest possible length. They patiently broke the watches to pieces, and of the junk they garnered made a ragged foot and a half of "wire." Their coins stretched the line still further.

They had ten feet covered before the stuff was half used up. Their metal pencils, taken apart, gave them a good two feet. Key chains helped generously. With eighteen feet covered, their progress began to slow down.

Perspiration poured down Miller's face. Desperately, he tore off his lodge ring and cut it in two to pound it flat. From garters and suspenders they won a few inches more. And then--they stopped--feet from their goal.

Miller groaned. He tossed his pocket-knife in his hand.
"We can get a foot out of this," he estimated. "But that still leaves us way short."

Abruptly, Erickson snapped his fingers.
"Shoes!" he gasped. "They're full of nails. Get to work with that knife, Dave. We'll cut out every one of 'em!"
In ten minutes, the shoes were reduced to ragged piles of tattered leather. Erickson's deft fingers painstakingly placed the nails, one by one, in the line. The distance left to cover was less than six inches!

He lined up the last few nails. Then both men were sinking back on their heels, as they saw there was a gap of three inches to cover!

"Beaten!" Erickson ground out. "By three inches! Three inches from the present ... and yet it might as well be a million miles!"

Miller's body felt as though it were in a vise. His muscles ached with strain. So taut were his nerves that he leaped as though stung when Major nuzzled a cool nose into his hand again. Automatically, he began to stroke the dog's neck.

"Well, that licks us," he muttered. "There isn't another piece of movable metal in the world."

Major kept whimpering and pushing against him. Annoyed, the druggist shoved him away.

"Go 'way," he muttered. "I don't feel like--"

Suddenly then his eyes widened, as his touch encountered warm metal. He whirlered.

"There it is!" he yelled. "The last link. The nameplate on Major's collar!"

In a flash, he had torn the little rectangular brass plate from the dog collar. Erickson took it from his grasp. Sweat stood shiny on his skin. He held the bit of metal over the gap between wire and pole.

"This is it!" he smiled brittlely. "We're on our way, Dave. Where, I don't know. To death, or back to life. But--we're going!"

The metal clinked into place. Live, writhing power leaped through the wire, snarling across partial breaks. The transformers began to hum. The humming grew louder. Singing softly, the bronze globe over their heads glowed green. Dave Miller felt a curious lightness. There was a snap in his brain, and Erickson, Major and the laboratory faded from his senses.

Then came an interval when the only sound was the soft sobbing he had been hearing as if in a dream. That, and blackness that enfolded him like soft velvet. Then Miller was opening his eyes, to see the familiar walls of his own kitchen around him!

Someone cried out.

"Dave! Oh, Dave, dear!"

It was Helen's voice, and it was Helen who cradled his head in her lap and bent her face close to his.

"Oh, thank God that you're alive--!"

"Helen!" Miller murmured. "What--are--you--doing here?"

"I couldn't go through with it. I--I just couldn't leave you. I came back and--and I heard the shot and ran in. The doctor should be here. I called him five minutes ago."

"Five minutes ... How long has it been since I shot myself?"

"Oh, just six or seven minutes. I called the doctor right away."

Miller took a deep breath. Then it must have been a dream. All that--to happen in a few minutes-- It wasn't possible!

"How--how could I have botched the job?" he muttered. "I wasn't drunk enough to miss myself completely."

Helen looked at the huge revolver lying in the sink.

"Oh, that old forty-five of Grandfather's! It hasn't been loaded since the Civil War. I guess the powder got damp or something. It just sort of sputtered instead of exploding properly. Dave, promise me something! You won't ever do anything like this again, if I promise not to nag you?"

Dave Miller closed his eyes. "There won't be any need to nag, Helen. Some people take a lot of teaching, but I've had my lesson. I've got ideas about the store which I'd been too lazy to try out. You know, I feel more like fighting right now than I have for years! We'll lick 'em, won't we, honey?"

Helen buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder and cried softly. Her words were too muffled to be intelligible. But Dave Miller understood what she meant.

* * * * *

He had thought the whole thing a dream--John Erickson, the "time impulsor" and Major. But that night he read an item in the Evening Courier that was to keep him thinking for many days.

**POLICE INVESTIGATE DEATH OF SCIENTIST HERE IN LABORATORY**

John M. Erickson, director of the Wanamaker Institute, died at his work last night. Erickson was a beloved and valuable figure in the world of science, famous for his recently publicized "time lapse" theory.

Two strange circumstances surrounded his death. One was the presence of a German shepherd dog in the laboratory, its head crushed as if with a sledgehammer. The other was a chain of small metal objects stretching from one corner of the room to the other, as if intended to take the place of wire in a circuit.

Police, however, discount this idea, as there was a roll of wire only a few feet from the body.
THE ETERNAL WALL
By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

A scream of brakes, the splash into icy waters, a long descent into alkaline depths ... it was death. But Ned Vince lived again--a million years later!

"See you in half an hour, Betty," said Ned Vince over the party telephone. "We'll be out at the Silver Basket before ten-thirty...."

Ned Vince was eager for the company of the girl he loved. That was why he was in a hurry to get to the neighboring town of Hurley, where she lived. His old car rattled and roared as he swung it recklessly around Pit Bend.

There was where Death tapped him on the shoulder. Another car leaped suddenly into view, its lights glaring blindingly past a high, up-jutting mass of Jurassic rock at the turn of the road.

Dazzled, and befuddled by his own rash speed, Ned Vince had only swift young reflexes to rely on to avoid a fearful, telescoping collision. He flicked his wheel smoothly to the right; but the County Highway Commission hadn't yet tarred the traffic-loosened gravel at the Bend.

Ned could scarcely have chosen a worse place to start sliding and spinning. His car hit the white-painted wooden rail sideways, crashed through, tumbled down a steep slope, struck a huge boulder, bounced up a little, and arced outward, falling as gracefully as a swan-diver toward the inky waters of the Pit, fifty feet beneath....

Ned Vince was still dimly conscious when that black, quiet pool geysered around him in a mighty splash. He had only a dazing welt on his forehead, and a gag of terror in his throat.

Movement was slower now, as he began to sink, trapped inside his wrecked car. Nothing that he could imagine could mean doom more certainly than this. The Pit was a tremendously deep pocket in the ground, spring-fed. The edges of that almost bottomless pool were caked with a rim of white--for the water, on which dead birds so often floated, was surcharged with alkali. As that heavy, natronous liquid rushed up through the openings and cracks beneath his feet, Ned Vince knew that his friends and his family would never see his body again, lost beyond recovery in this abyss.

The car was deeply submerged. The light had blinked out on the dash-panel, leaving Ned in absolute darkness. A flood rushed in at the shattered window. He clawed at the door, trying to open it, but it was jammed in the crash-bent frame, and he couldn't fight against the force of that incoming water. The welt, left by the blow he had received on his forehead, put a thickening mist over his brain, so that he could not think clearly. Presently, when he could no longer hold his breath, bitter liquid was sucked into his lungs.

His last thoughts were those of a drowning man. The machine-shop he and his dad had had in Harwich. Betty Moore, with the smiling Irish eyes--like in the song. Betty and he had planned to go to the State University this Fall. They'd planned to be married sometime.... Goodbye, Betty ...

The ripples that had ruffled the surface waters in the Pit, quieted again to glassy smoothness. The eternal stars shone calmly. The geologic Dakota hills, which might have seen the dinosaurs, still bulked along the highway. Time, the Brother of Death, and the Father of Change, seemed to wait....

"Kaallee! Tik!... Tik, tik, tik!... Kaalleeel!..."

The excited cry, which no human throat could quite have duplicated accurately, arose thinly from the depths of a powder-dry gulch, water-scared from an inconceivable antiquity. The noon-day Sun was red and huge. The air
was tenuous, dehydrated, chill.

"Kaalleeel!... Tik, tik, tik!...

At first there was only one voice uttering those weird, triumphant sounds. Then other vocal organs took up that trilling wail, and those short, sharp chuckles of eagerness. Other questioning, wondering notes mixed with the cadence. Lacking qualities identifiable as human, the disturbance was still like the babble of a group of workmen who have discovered something remarkable.

The desolate expanse around the gulch, was all but without motion. The icy breeze tore tiny puffs of dust from grotesque, angling drifts of soil, nearly waterless for eons. Patches of drab lichen grew here and there on the up-jutting rocks, but in the desert itself, no other life was visible. Even the hills had sagged away, flattened by incalculable ages of erosion.

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At a mile distance, a crumbling heap of rubble arose. Once it had been a building. A gigantic, jagged mass of detritus slanted upward from its crest--red debris that had once been steel. A launching catapult for the last space ships built by the gods in exodus, perhaps it was--half a million years ago. Man was gone from the Earth. Glacial ages, war, decadence, disease, and a final scattering of those ultimate superhumans to newer worlds in other solar systems, had done that.

"Kaalleeel!... Tik, tik, tik!..." The sounds were not human. They were more like the chatter and wail of small desert animals.

But there was a seeming paradox here in the depths of that gulch, too. The glint of metal, sharp and burnished. The flat, streamlined bulk of a flying machine, shiny and new. The bell-like muzzle of a strange excavator-apparatus, which seemed to depend on a blast of atoms to clear away rock and soil. Thus the gulch had been cleared of the accumulated rubbish of antiquity. Man, it seemed, had a successor, as ruler of the Earth.

Loy Chuk had flown his geological expedition out from the far lowlands to the east, out from the city of Kar-Rah. And he was very happy now--flushed with a vast and unlooked-for success.

He crouched there on his haunches, at the dry bottom of the Pit. The breeze rumpled his long, brown fur. He wasn't very different in appearance from his ancestors. A foot tall, perhaps, as he squatted there in that antique stance of his kind. His tail was short and furred, his undersides creamy. White whiskers spread around his inquisitive, pink-tipped snout.

But his cranium bulged up and forward between shrewd, beady eyes, betraying the slow heritage of time, of survival of the fittest, of evolution. He could think and dream and invent, and the civilization of his kind was already far beyond that of the ancient Twentieth Century.

Loy Chuk and his fellow workers were gathered, tense and gleeful, around the things their digging had exposed to the daylight. There was a gob of junk--scarcely more than an irregular formation of flaky rust. But imbedded in it was a huddled form, brown and hard as old wood. The dry mud that had encased it like an airtight coffin, had by now been chipped away by the tiny investigators; but soiled clothing still clung to it, after perhaps a million years. Metal had gone into decay--yes. But not this body. The answer to this was simple--alkali. A mineral saturation that had held time and change in stasis. A perfect preservative for organic tissue, aided probably during most of those passing eras by desert dryness. The Dakotas had turned arid very swiftly. This body was not a mere fossil. It was a mummy.

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"Kaalleeel!" Man, that meant. Not the star-conquering demi-gods, but the ancestral stock that had built the first machines on Earth, and in the early Twenty-first Century, the first interplanetary rockets. No wonder Loy Chuk and his co-workers were happy in their paleontological enthusiasm! A strange accident, happening in a legendary antiquity, had aided them in their quest for knowledge.

At last Loy Chuk gave a soft, chirping signal. The chant of triumph ended, while instruments flicked in his tiny hands. The final instrument he used to test the mummy, looked like a miniature stereoscope, with complicated details. He held it over his eyes. On the tiny screen within, through the agency of focused X-rays, he saw magnified images of the internal organs of this ancient human corpse.

What his probing gaze revealed to him, made his pleasure even greater than before. In twittering, chattering sounds, he communicated his further knowledge to his henchmen. Though devoid of moisture, the mummy was perfectly preserved, even to its brain cells! Medical and biological sciences were far advanced among Loy Chuk's kind. Perhaps, by the application of principles long known to them, this long-dead body could be made to live again! It might move, speak, remember its past! What a marvelous subject for study it would make, back there in the museums of Kar-Rah!

"Tik, tik, tik!...

But Loy silenced this fresh, eager chattering with a command. Work was always more substantial than
cheering.

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With infinite care--small, sharp hand-tools were used, now--the mummy of Ned Vince was disengaged from the worthless rust of his primitive automobile. With infinite care it was crated in a metal case, and hauled into the flying machine.

Flashing flame, the latter arose, bearing the entire hundred members of the expedition. The craft shot eastward at bullet-like speed. The spreading continental plateau of North America seemed to crawl backward, beneath. A tremendous sand desert, marked with low, washed-down mountains, and the vague, angular, geometric mounds of human cities that were gone forever.

Beyond the eastern rim of the continent, the plain dipped downward steeply. The white of dried salt was on the hills, but there was a little green growth here, too. The dead sea-bottom of the vanished Atlantic was not as dead as the highlands.

Far out in a deep valley, Kar-Rah, the city of the rodents, came into view--a crystalline maze of low, bubble-like structures, glittering in the red sunshine. But this was only its surface aspect. Loy Chuk's people had built their homes mostly underground, since the beginning of their foggy evolution. Besides, in this latter day, the nights were very cold, the shelter of subterranean passages and rooms was welcome.

The mummy was taken to Loy Chuk's laboratory, a short distance below the surface. Here at once, the scientist began his work. The body of the ancient man was put in a large vat. Fluids submerged it, slowly soaking from that hardened flesh the alkali that had preserved it for so long. The fluid was changed often, until woody muscles and other tissues became pliable once more.

Then the more delicate processes began. Still submerged in liquid, the corpse was submitted to a flow of restorative energy, passing between complicated electrodes. The cells of antique flesh and brain gradually took on a chemical composition nearer to that of the life that they had once known.

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At last the final liquid was drained away, and the mummy lay there, a mummy no more, but a pale, silent figure in its tatters of clothing. Loy Chuk put an odd, metal-fabric helmet on its head, and a second, much smaller helmet on his own. Connected with this arrangement, was a black box of many uses. For hours he worked with his apparatus, studying, and guiding the recording instruments. The time passed swiftly.

At last, eager and ready for whatever might happen now, Loy Chuk pushed another switch. With a cold, rosy flare, energy blazed around that moveless form.

For Ned Vince, timeless eternity ended like a gradual fading mist. When he could see clearly again, he experienced that inevitable shock of vast change around him. Though it had been dehydrated, his brain had been kept perfectly intact through the ages, and now it was restored. So his memories were as vivid as yesterday.

Yet, through that crystalline vat in which he lay, he could see a broad, low room, in which he could barely have stood erect. He saw instruments and equipment whose weird shapes suggested alienness, and knowledge beyond the era he had known! The walls were lavender and phosphorescent. Fossil bone-fragments were mounted in shallow cases. Dinosaur bones, some of them seemed, from their size. But there was a complete skeleton of a dog, too, and the skeleton of a man, and a second man-skeleton that was not quite human. Its neck-vertebrae were very thick and solid, its shoulders were wide, and its skull was gigantic.

All this weirdness had a violent effect on Ned Vince--a sudden, nostalgic panic. Something was fearfully wrong!

The nervous terror of the unknown was on him. Feeble and dizzy after his weird resurrection, which he could not understand, remembering as he did that moment of sinking to certain death in the pool at Pit Bend, he caught the edge of the transparent vat, and pulled himself to a sitting posture. There was a muffled murmur around him, as of some vast, un-Earthly metropolis.

"Take it easy, Ned Vince..."

The words themselves, and the way they were assembled, were old, familiar friends. But the tone was wrong. It was high, shrill, parrot-like, and mechanical. Ned's gaze searched for the source of the voice--located the black box just outside of his crystal vat. From that box the voice seemed to have originated. Before it crouched a small, brownish animal with a bulging head. The animal's tiny-fingered paws--hands they were, really--were touching rows of keys.

To Ned Vince, it was all utterly insane and incomprehensible. A rodent, looking like a prairie dog, a little; but plainly possessing a high order of intelligence. And a voice whose soothingly familiar words were more repugnant somehow, simply because they could never belong in a place as eerie as this.

Ned Vince did not know how Loy Chuk had probed his brain, with the aid of a pair of helmets, and the black box apparatus. He did not know that in the latter, his language, taken from his own revitalized mind, was recorded,
and that Loy Chuk had only to press certain buttons to make the instrument express his thoughts in common, long-dead English. Loy, whose vocal organs were not human, would have had great difficulty speaking English words, anyway.

Ned's dark hair was wildly awry. His gaunt, young face held befuddled terror. He gasped in the thin atmosphere. "I've gone nuts," he pronounced with a curious calm. "Stark--starin'--nuts...."

* * * * *

Loy's box, with its recorded English words and its sonic detectors, could translate for its master, too. As the man spoke, Loy read the illuminated symbols in his own language, flashed on a frosted crystal plate before him. Thus he knew what Ned Vince was saying.

Loy Chuk pressed more keys, and the box reproduced his answer: "No, Ned, not nuts. Not a bit of it! There are just a lot of things that you've got to get used to, that's all. You drowned about a million years ago. I discovered your body. I brought you back to life. We have science that can do that. I'm Loy Chuk...."

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It took only a moment for the box to tell the full story in clear, bold, friendly terms. Thus Loy sought, with calm, human logic, to make his charge feel at home. Probably, though, he was a fool, to suppose that he could succeed, thus.

Vince started to mutter, struggling desperately to reason it out. "A prairie dog," he said. "Speaking to me. One million years. Evolution. The scientists say that people grew up from fishes in the sea. Prairie dogs are smart. So maybe super-prairie-dogs could come from them. A lot easier than men from fish...."

It was all sound logic. Even Ned Vince knew that. Still, his mind, tuned to ordinary, simple things, couldn't quite realize all the vast things that had happened to himself, and to the world. The scope of it all was too staggeringly big. One million years. God!...

Ned Vince made a last effort to control himself. His knuckles tightened on the edge of the vat. "I don't know what you've been talking about," he grated wildly. "But I want to get out of here! I want to go back where I came from! Do you understand--whomever, or whatever you are?"

Loy Chuk pressed more keys. "But you can't go back to the Twentieth Century," said the box. "Nor is there any better place for you to be now, than Kar-Rah. You are the only man left on Earth. Those men that exist in other star systems are not really your kind anymore, though their forefathers originated on this planet. They have gone far beyond you in evolution. To them you would be only a senseless curiosity. You are much better off with my people--our minds are much more like yours. We will take care of you, and make you comfortable...."

But Ned Vince wasn't listening, now. "You are the only man left on Earth." That had been enough for him to hear. He didn't more than half believe it. His mind was too confused for conviction about anything. Everything he saw and felt and heard might be some kind of nightmare. But then it might all be real instead, and that was abysmal horror. Ned was no coward--death and danger of any ordinary Earthly kind, he could have faced bravely. But the loneliness here, and the utter strangeness, were hideous like being stranded alone on another world!

His heart was pounding heavily, and his eyes were wide. He looked across this eerie room. There was a ramp there at the other side, leading upward instead of a stairway. Fierce impulse to escape this nameless lair, to try to learn the facts for himself, possessed him. He bounded out of the vat, and with head down, dashed for the ramp.

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He had to go most of the way on his hands and knees, for the up-slanting passage was low. Excited animal chucklings around him, and the occasional touch of a furry body, hurried his feverish scrambling. But he emerged at last at the surface.

He stood there panting in that frigid, rarefied air. It was night. The Moon was a gigantic, pock-marked bulk. The constellations were unrecognizable. The rodent city was a glowing expanse of shallow, crystalline domes, set among odd, scrub trees and bushes. The crags loomed on all sides, all their jaggedness lost after a million years of erosion under an ocean that was gone. In that ghastly moonlight, the ground glistened with dry salt.

"Well, I guess it's all true, huh?" Ned Vince muttered in a flat tone.

Behind him he heard an excited, squeaky chattering. Rodents in pursuit. Looking back, he saw the pinpoint gleams of countless little eyes. Yes, he might as well be an exile on another planet--so changed had the Earth become.

A wave of intolerable homesickness came over him as he sensed the distances of time that had passed--those inconceivable eons, separating himself from his friends, from Betty, from almost everything that was familiar. He started to run, away from those glittering rodent eyes. He sensed death in that cold sea-bottom, but what of it? What reason did he have left to live? He'd be only a museum piece here, a thing to be caged and studied....

Prison or a madhouse would be far better. He tried to get hold of his courage. But what was there to inspire it? Nothing! He laughed harshly as he ran, welcoming that bitter, killing cold. Nostalgia had him in its clutch, and there
was no answer in his hell-world, lost beyond the barrier of the years....

* * * * *

Loy Chuk and his followers presently came upon Ned Vince's unconscious form, a mile from the city of Kar-Rah. In a flying machine they took him back, and applied stimulants. He came to, in the same laboratory room as before. But he was firmly strapped to a low platform this time, so that he could not escape again. There he lay, helpless, until presently an idea occurred to him. It gave him a few crumbs of hope.

"Hey, somebody!" he called.

"You'd better get some rest, Ned Vince," came the answer from the black box. It was Loy Chuk speaking again.

"But listen!" Ned protested. "You know a lot more than we did in the Twentieth Century. And--well--there's that thing called time-travel, that I used to read about. Maybe you know how to make it work! Maybe you could send me back to my own time after all!"

Little Loy Chuk was in a black, discouraged mood, himself. He could understand the utter, sick dejection of this giant from the past, lost from his own kind. Probably insanity looming. In far less extreme circumstances than this, death from homesickness had come.

Loy Chuk was a scientist. In common with all real scientists, regardless of the species from which they spring, he loved the subjects of his researches. He wanted this ancient man to live and to be happy. Or this creature would be of scant value for study.

So Loy considered carefully what Ned Vince had suggested. Time-travel. Almost a legend. An assault upon an intangible wall that had baffled far keener wits than Loy's. But he was bent, now, on the well-being of this anachronism he had so miraculously resurrected--this human, this Kaalleee....

Loy jabbed buttons on the black box. "Yes, Ned Vince," said the sonic apparatus. "Time-travel. Perhaps that is the only thing to do--to send you back to your own period of history. For I see that you will never be yourself, here. It will be hard to accomplish, but we'll try. Now I shall put you under an anesthetic...."

Ned felt better immediately, for there was real hope now, where there had been none before. Maybe he'd be back in his home-town of Harwich again. Maybe he'd see the old machine-shop, there. And the trees greening out in Spring. Maybe he'd be seeing Betty Moore in Hurley, soon.... Ned relaxed, as a tiny hypo-needle bit into his arm....

As soon as Ned Vince passed into unconsciousness, Loy Chuk went to work once more, using that pair of brain-helmets again, exploring carefully the man's mind. After hours of research, he proceeded to prepare his plans. The government of Kar-Rah was a scientific oligarchy, of which Loy was a prime member. It would be easy to get the help he needed.

A horde of small, grey-furred beings and their machines, toiled for many days.

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Ned Vince's mind swam gradually out of the blur that had enveloped it. He was wandering aimlessly about in a familiar room. The girders of the roof above were of red-painted steel. His tool-benches were there, greasy and littered with metal filings, just as they had always been. He had a tractor to repair, and a seed-drill. Outside of the machine-shop, the old, familiar yellow sun was shining. Across the street was the small brown house, where he lived.

With a sudden startlement, he saw Betty Moore in the doorway. She wore a blue dress, and a mischievous smile curved her lips. As though she had succeeded in creeping up on him, for a surprise.

"Why, Ned," she chuckled. "You look as though you've been dreaming, and just woke up!"

He grimaced ruefully as she approached. With a kind of fierce gratitude, he took her in his arms. Yes, she was just like always.

"I guess I was dreaming, Betty," he whispered, feeling that mighty sense of relief. "I must have fallen asleep at the bench, here, and had a nightmare. I thought I had an accident at Pit Bend--and that a lot of worse things happened.... But it wasn't true...."

Ned Vince's mind, over which there was still an elusive fog that he did not try to shake off, accepted apparent facts simply.

He did not know anything about the invisible radiations beating down upon him, soothing and dimming his brain, so that it would never question or doubt, or observe too closely the incongruous circumstances that must often appear. The lack of traffic in the street without, for instance--and the lack of people besides himself and Betty.

He didn't know that this machine-shop was built from his own memories of the original. He didn't know that this Betty was of the same origin--a miraculous fabrication of metal and energy-units and soft plastic. The trees outside were only lantern-slide illusions.

It was all built inside a great, opaque dome. But there were hidden television systems, too. Thus Loy Chuk's kind could study this ancient man--this Kaalleee. Thus, their motives were mostly selfish.

Loy, though, was not observing, now. He had wandered far out into cold, sad sea-bottom, to ponder. He
squeaked and chatted to himself, contemplating the magnificent, inexorable march of the ages. He remembered the ancient ruins, left by the final supermen.

"The Kaalleee believes himself home," Loy was thinking. "He will survive and be happy. But there was no other way. Time is an Eternal Wall. Our archeological researches among the cities of the supermen show the truth. Even they, who once ruled Earth, never escaped from the present by so much as an instant..."

THE END
planets remained to form a diadem just above the intricate braiding of her dull red hair. As she moved into the secret way, the five orbs swung with her, and in the darkness there the sun glowed richly, sending out a light to guide their feet.

They were at the top of a stairway and the hollow clang of the stone as it moved back into place behind them echoed through a gulf which seemed endless. But that too was as the chronicles had said and Varta knew no fear.

How long they journeyed down into the maw of the mountain and, beyond that, into the womb of Erb itself, Varta never knew. But, when feet were weary and she knew the bite of real hunger, they came into a passageway which ended in a room hollowed of solid rock. And there, preserved in the chest in which men born in the youth of Memphir had laid them, Varta found that which would keep her safe on the path she must take. She put aside the fine silks, the jeweled cincture, which had been the badge of Asti's service and drew on over her naked body a suit of scaled skin, gemmed and glistening in the rays of the small sun. There was a hood to cover the entire head, taloned gloves for the hands, webbed, clawed coverings for the feet—as if the skin of a giant, man-like lizard had been tanned and fashioned into this suit. And Varta suspected that that might be so—the world of Erb had not always been held by the human-kind alone.

There were supplies here too, lying untouched in ageless containers within a lizard-skin pouch. Varta touched her tongue without fear to a powdered restorative, sharing it with Lur, whose own mailed skin would protect him through the dangers to come.

She folded the regalia she had stripped off and laid it in the chest, smoothing it regretfully before she dropped the lid upon its shimmering color. Never again would Asti's servant wear the soft stuff of His Livery. But she was resolute enough when she picked up the food pouch and strode forward, passing out of the robing chamber into a narrow way which was a natural fault in the rock unsmoothed by the tools of man.

But when this rocky road ended upon the lip of a gorge, Varta hesitated, plucking at the throat latch of her hood-like helmet. Through the unclouded crystal of its eye-holes she could see the sprouts of yellow vapor which puffed from crannies in the rock wall down which she must climb. If the records of the Temple spoke true, these curls of gas were death to all lunged creatures of the upper world. She could only trust that the cunning of the scaled hood would not fail her.

The long talons fitted to the finger tips of the gloves, the claws of the webbed foot coverings clamped fast to every hand and foot hold, but the way down was long and she caught a message of weariness from Lur before they reached the piled rocks at the foot of the cliff. The puffs of steamy gas had become a fog through which they groped their way slowly, following a trace of path along the base of the cliff.

Time did not exist in the underworld of Erb. Varta did not know whether it was still today, or whether she had passed into tomorrow when they came to a cross roads. She felt Lur press against her, forcing her back against a rock.

"There is a thing coming—" his message was clear.

And in a moment she too saw a dark hulk nosing through the vapor. It moved slowly, seeming to balance at each step as if travel was a painful act. But it bore steadily to the meeting of the two paths.

"It is no enemy—" But she did not need that reassurance from Lur. Unearthly as the thing looked it had no menace.

With a last twist of ungainly body the creature squatted on a rock and clawed the clumsy covering it wore about its bone-thin shoulders and domed-skull head. The visage it revealed was long and gray, with dark pits for eyes and a gaping, fang-studded, lipless mouth.

"Who are you who dare to tread the forgotten ways and rouse from slumber the Guardian of the Chasms?"

The question was a shrill whine in her brain, her hands half arose to cover her ears—

"I am Varta, Maiden of Asti. Memphir has fallen to the barbarians of the Outer Lands and now I go, as Asti once ordered—."

The Guardian considered her answer gravely. In one skeleton claw it fumbled a rod and with this it now traced certain symbols in the dust before Varta's webbed feet. When it had done, the girl stooped and altered two of the lines with a swift stroke from one of her talons. The creature of the Chasm nodded its misshapen head.

"Asti does not rule here. But long, and long, and long ago there was a pact made with us in His Name. Pass free from us, woman of the Light. There are two paths before you—."

The Guardian paused for so long that Varta dared to prompt it.

"Where do they lead, Guardian of the Dark?"

"This will take you down into my country," it jerked the rod to the right. "And that way is death for creatures from the surface world. The other—in our old legends it is said to bring a traveler out into the upper world. Of the truth of that I have no proof."

"But that one I must take," she made slight obeisance to the huddle of bones and dank cloak on the rock and it
inclined its head in grave courtesy.

With Lur pushing a little ahead, she took the road which ran straight into the flume-veiled darkness. Nor did she turn to look again at the Thing from the Chasm world.

They began to climb again, across slimed rock where there were evil trails of other things which lived in this haunted darkness. But the sun of Asti lighted their way and perhaps some virtue in the rays from it kept away the makers of such trails.

When they pulled themselves up onto a wide ledge the talons on Varta's gloves were worn to splintered stubs and there was a bright girdle of pain about her aching body. Lur lay panting beside her, his red-forked tongue protruding from his foam ringed mouth.

"We walk again the ways of men," Lur was the first to note the tool marks on the stone where they lay. "By the Will of Asti, we may win out of this maze after all."

Since there were no signs of the deadly steam Varta dared to push off her hood and share with her companion the sustaining power she carried in her pouch. There was a freshness to the air they breathed, damp and cold though it was, which hinted of the upper world.

The ledge sloped upwards, at a steep angle at first, and then more gently. Lur slipped past her and thrust head and shoulders through a break in the rock. Grasping his neck spines she allowed him to pull her through that narrow slit into the soft blackness of a surface night. They tumbled down together, Varta's head pillowed on Lur's smooth side, and so slept as the sun and worlds of Asti whirled protectingly above them.

A whir of wings in the air above her head awakened Varta. One of the small, jewel bright flying lizard creatures of the deep jungle poised and dipped to investigate more closely the worlds of Asti. But at Varta's upflung arm it uttered a rasping cry and planed down into the mass of vegetation below. By the glint of sunlight on the stone around them the day was already well advanced. Varta tugged at Lur's mane until he roused.

There was a regularity to the rocks piled about their sleeping place which hinted that they had lain among the ruins left by man. But of this side of the mountains both were ignorant, for Memphir's rule had not run here.

"Many dead things in times past," Lur's scarlet nostril pits were extended to their widest. "But that was long ago. This land is no longer held by men."

Varta laughed cheerfully. "If here there are no men, then there will rise no barbarian hordes to dispute our rule. Asti has led us to safety. Let us see more of the land He gives us."

There was a road leading down from the ruins, a road still to be followed in spite of the lash of landslip and the crack of time. And it brought them into a cup of green fertility where the lavishness of Asti's sowing was unchecked by man. Varta seized eagerly upon globes of blood red fruit which she recognized as delicacies which had been cultivated in the Temple gardens, while Lur went hunting into the fringes of the jungle, there dining on prey so easily caught as to be judged devoid of fear.

The jungle choked highway curved and they were suddenly fronted by a desert of sere desolation, a desert floored by glassy slag which sent back the sun beams in a furnace glare. Varta shaded her eyes and tried to see the end of this, but, if there was a distant rim of green beyond, the heat distortions in the air concealed it.

Lur put out a front paw to test the slag but withdrew it instantly.

"It cooks the flesh, we can not walk here," was his verdict.

Varta pointed with her chin to the left where, some distance away, the mountain wall paralleled their course.

"Then let us keep to the jungle over there and see if it does not bring around to the far side. But what made this—?" She leaned out over the glassy stuff, not daring to touch the slick surface.

"War." Lur's tongue shot out to impale a questing beetle. "These forgotten people fought with fearsome weapons."

"But what weapon could do this? Memphir knew not such—."

"Memphir was old. But mayhap there were those who raised cities on Erb before the first hut of Memphir squatted on tidal mud. Men forget knowledge in time. Even in Memphir the lords of the last days forgot the wisdom of their earlier sages—they fell before the barbarians easily enough."

"If ever men had wisdom to produce this—it was not of Asti's giving," she edged away from the glare. "Let us go."

But now they had to fight their way through jungle and it was hard—until they reached a ridge of rock running out from the mountain as a tongue thrust into the blasted valley. And along this they picked their slow way.

"There is water near—," Lur's thought answered the girl's desire. She licked dry lips longingly. "This way—," her companion's sudden turn was to the left and Varta was quick to follow him down a slide of rock.

Lur's instinct was right, as it ever was. There was water before them, a small lake of it. But even as he dipped his fanged muzzle toward that inviting surface, Lur's spined head jerked erect again. Varta snatched back the hand she had put out, staring at Lur's strange actions. His nostrils expanded to their widest, his long neck outstretched, he
was swinging his head back and forth across the limpid shallows.

"What is it—?"

"This is no water such as we know," the scaled one answered flatly. "It has life within it."

Varta laughed. "Fish, water snakes, your own distant kin, Lur. It is the scent of them which you catch—"

"No. It is the water itself which lives—and yet does not live—" His thought trailed away from her as he struggled with some problem. No human brain could follow his unless he willed it so.

Varta squatted back on her heels and began to look at the water and then at the banks with more care. For the first time she noted the odd patches of brilliant color which floated just below the surface of the liquid. Blue, green, yellow, crimson, they drifted slowly with the tiny waves which lapped the shore. But they were not alive, she was almost sure of that, they appeared more a part of the water itself.

Watching the voyage of one patch of green she caught sight of the branch. It was a drooping shoot of the turbi, the same tree vine which produced the fruit she had relished less than an hour before. Above the water dangled a cluster of the fruit, dead ripe with the sweet pulp stretching its skin. But below the surface of the water—

Varta's breath hissed between her teeth and Lur's head snapped around as he caught her thought.

The branch below the water bore a perfect circle of green flowers close to its tip, the flowers which the turbi had borne naturally seven months before and which should long ago have turned into just such sweetness as hung above.

With Lur at her heels the girl edged around to pull cautiously at the branch. It yielded at once to her touch, swinging its tip out of the lake. She sniffed—there was a languid perfume in the air, the perfume of the blooming turbi. She examined the flowers closely, to all appearances they were perfect and natural.

"It preserves," Lur settled back on his haunches and waved one front paw at the quiet water. "What goes into it remains as it was just at the moment of entrance."

"But if this is seven months old—"

"It may be seven years old," corrected Lur. "How can you tell when that branch first dipped into the lake? Yet the flowers do not fade even when withdrawn from the water. This is indeed a mystery!"

"Of which I would know more!" Varta dropped the turbi and started on around the edge of the lake.

Twice more they found similar evidence of preservation in fruit or leaf, wherever it was covered by the opaline water.

The lake itself was a long and narrow slash with one end cutting into the desert of glass while the other wet the foot of the mountain. And it was there, on the slope of the mountain that they found the greatest wonder of all, Lur scenting it before they sighted the remains among the stones.

"Man made," he cautioned, "but very, very old."

And truly the wreckage they came upon must have been old, perhaps even older than Memphir. For the part which rested above the water was almost gone, rusty red stains on the rocks outlining where it had lain. But under water was a smooth silver hull, shining and untouched by the years. Varta laid her hand upon a ruddy scrap between two rocks and it became a drift of powdery dust. And yet—there a few feet below was strong metal!

Lur padded along the scrap of shore surveying the thing.

"It was a machine in which men traveled," his thoughts arose to her. "But they were not as the men of Memphir. Perhaps not even as the sons of Erb—"

"Not as the sons of Erb!" her astonishment broke into open speech.

Lur's neck twisted as he looked up at her. "Did the men of Erb, even in the old chronicles fight with weapons such as would make a desert of glass? There are other worlds than Erb, mayhap this strange thing was a sky ship from such a world. All things are possible by the Will of Asti."

Varta nodded. "All things are possible by the Will of Asti," she repeated. "But, Lur," her eyes were round with wonder, "perhaps it is Asti's Will which brought us here to find this marvel! Perhaps He has some use for us and it!"

"At least we may discover what lies within it," Lur had his own share of curiosity.

"How? The two of us can not draw that out of the water!"

"No, but we can enter into it!"

Varta fingered the folds of the hood on her shoulders. She knew what Lur meant, the suit which had protected her in the underworld was impervious to everything outside its surface—or to every substance its makers knew—just as Lur's own hide made his flesh impenetrable. But the fashioners of her suit had probably never known of the living lake and what if she had no defense against the strange properties of the water?

She leaned back against a rock. Overhead the worlds and sun of Asti still traveled their appointed paths. The worlds of Asti! If it was His Will which had brought them here, then Asti's power would wrap her round with safety. By His Will she had come out of Memphir over ways no human of Erb had ever trod before. Could she doubt that His Protection was with her now?
It took only a moment to make secure the webbed shoes, to pull on and fasten the hood, to tighten the buckles of her gloves. Then she crept forward, shuddering as the water rose about her ankles. But Lur pushed on before her, his head disappearing fearlessly under the surface as he crawled through the jagged opening in the ship below.

Smashed engines which had no meaning in her eyes occupied most of the broken section of the wreck. None of the metal showed any deterioration beyond that which had occurred at the time of the crash. Under her exploring hands it was firm and whole.

Lur was pulling at a small door half hidden by a mass of twisted wires and plates and, just as Varta crawled around this obstacle to join him, the barrier gave way allowing them to squeeze through into what had once been the living quarters of the ship.

Varta recognized seats, a table, and other bits of strictly utilitarian furniture. But of those who had once been at home there, there remained no trace. Lur, having given one glance to the furnishings, was prowling about the far end of the cabin uncertainly, and now he voiced his uneasiness.

"There is something beyond, something which once had life—"

Varta crowded up to him. To her eyes the wall seemed without line of an opening, and yet Lur was running his broad front paws over it carefully, now and then throwing his weight against the smooth surface.

"There is no door—" she pointed out doubtfully.

"No door—ah—here—" Lur unsheathed formidable fighting claws to their full length for perhaps the first time in his temple-sheltered life, and endeavored to work them into a small crevice. The muscles of his forelegs and quarters stood out in sharp relief under his scales, his fangs were bare as his lips snapped back with effort.

Something gave, a thin black line appeared to mark the edges of a door. Then time, or Lur's strength, broke the ancient locking mechanism. The door gave so suddenly that they were both sent hurtling backward and Lur's breath burst from him in a huge bubble.

The sealed compartment was hardly more than a cupboard but it was full. Spread-eagled against the wall was a four-limbed creature whose form was so smothered in a bulky suit that Varta could only guess that it was akin in shape to her own. Hoops of metal locked it firmly to the wall, but the head had fallen forward so that the face plate in the helmet was hidden.

Slowly the girl breast ed the water which filled the cabin and reached her hands toward the bowed helmet of the prisoner. Gingerly, her blunted talons scraping across metal, she pulled it up to her eye-level.

The eyes of that which stood within the suit were closed, as if in sleep, but there was a warm, healthy tint to the bronze skin, so different in shade to her own pallid coloring. For the rest, the prisoner had the two eyes, the centered nose, the properly shaped mouth which were common to the men of Erb. Hair grew on his head, black and thick and there was a faint shadow of beard on his jaw line.

"This is a man—" her thought reached Lur.

"Why not? Did you expect a serpent? It is a pity he is dead—"

Varta felt a rich warm tide rising in her throat to answer that teasing half question. There were times when Lur's thought reading was annoying. He had risen to his hind legs so that he too could look into the shell which held their find.

"Yes, a pity," he repeated. "But—"

A vision of the turbi flowers swept through her mind. Had Lur suggested it, or had that wild thought been hers alone? Only this ship was so old—so very old!

Lur's red tongue flicked. "It can do no harm to try—" he suggested slyly and set his claws into the hoop holding the captive's right wrist, testing its strength.

"But the metal on the shore, it crumpled into powder at my touch—" she protested. "What if we carry him out only to have—to have—" Her mind shuddered away from the picture which followed.

"Did the turbi blossom fade when pulled out?" countered Lur. "There is a secret to these fastenings—" He pulled and pried impatiently.

Varta tried to help but even their united strength was useless against the force which held the hoops in place. Breathless the girl slumped back against the wall of the cabin while Lur settled down on his haunches. One of the odd patches of color drifted by, its vivid scarlet like a jewel spiraling lazily upward. Varta's eyes followed its drift and so were guided to what she had forgotten, the worlds of Asti.

"Asti!"

Lur was looking up too.

"The power of Asti!"

Varta's hand went up, rested for a long moment under the sun and then drew it down, carefully, slowly, as she had in Memphir's temple. Then she stepped towards the captive. Within her hood a beaded line of moisture outlined her lips, a pulse thundered on her temple. This was a fearsome thing to try.
She held the sun on a line with one of the wrist bonds, She must avoid the flesh it imprisoned, for Asti's power could kill.

From the sun there shot an orange-red beam to strike full upon the metal. A thin line of red crept across the smooth hoop, crept and widened. Varta raised her hand, sending the sun spinning up and Lur's claws pulled on the metal. It broke like rotten wood in his grasp.

The girl gave a little gasp of half-terrified delight. Then the old legends were true! As Asti's priestess she controlled powers too great to guess. Swiftly she loosed the other hoops and restored the sun and worlds to their place over her head as the captive slumped across the threshold of his cell.

Tugging and straining they brought him out of the broken ship into the sunlight of Erb. Varta threw back her hood and breathed deeply of the air which was not manufactured by the wizardry of the lizard skin and Lur sat panting, his nostril flaps open. It was he who spied the spring on the mountain side above, a spring of water uncontaminated by the strange life of the lake. They both dragged themselves there to drink deeply.

Varta returned to the lake shore reluctantly. Within her heart she believed that the man they had brought from the ship was truly dead. Lur might hold out the promise of the flowers, but this was a man and he had lain in the water for countless ages—

So she went with lagging steps, to find Lur busy. He had solved the mystery of the space suit and had stripped it from the unknown. Now his clawed paw rested lightly on the bared chest and he turned to Varta eagerly.

"There is life—"

Hardly daring to believe that, she dropped down beside Lur and touched their prize. Lur was right, the flesh was warm and she had caught the faint rhythm of shallow breath. Half remembering old tales, she put her hands on the arch of the lower ribs and began to aid that rhythm. The breaths were deeper—

Then the man half turned, his arm moved. Varta and Lur drew back. For the first time the girl probed gently the sleeping mind before her—even as she had read the minds of those few of Memphir who had ascended to the temple precincts in the last days.

Much of what she read now was confused or so alien to Erb that it had no meaning for her. But she saw a great city plunged into flaming death in an instant and felt the horror and remorse of the man at her feet because of his own part in that act, the horror and remorse which had led him to open rebellion and so to his imprisonment. There was a last dark and frightening memory of a door closing on light and hope—

The space man moaned softly and hunched his shoulders as if he struggled vainly to tear loose from bonds.

"He thinks that he is still prisoner," observed Lur. "For him life begins at the very point it ended—even as it did for the turbi flowers. See—now he awakens."

The eyelids rose slowly, as if the man hated to see what he must look upon. Then, as he sighted Varta and Lur, his eyes went wide. He pulled himself up and looked dazedly around, striking out wildly with his fists. Catching sight of the clumsy suit Lur had taken from him he pulled at it, looking at the two before him as if he feared some attack.

Varta turned to Lur for help. She might read minds and use the wordless speech of Lur. But his people knew the art of such communication long before the first priest of Asti had stumbled upon their secret. Let Lur now quiet this outlander.

Delicately Lur sought a way into the other's mind, twisting down paths of thought strange to him. Even Varta could not follow the subtle waves sent forth in the quick examination and reconnoitering, nor could she understand all of the conversation which resulted. For the man from the ancient ship answered in speech aloud, sharp harsh sounds of no meaning. It was only after repeated instruction from Lur that he began to frame his messages in his mind, clumsily and disconnectedly.

Pictures of another world, another solar system, began to grow more clear as the space man became more at home in the new way of communication. He was one of a race who had come to Erb from beyond the stars and discovered a world without human life: So they had established colonies and built great cities—far different from Memphir—and had lived in peace for centuries of their own time.

Then on the faraway planet of their birth there had begun a great war, a war which brought flaming death to all that world. The survivors of a last battle in outer space had fled to the colonies on Erb. But among this handful were men driven mad by the death of their world, and these had blasted the cities of Erb, saying that their kind must be wiped out.

The man they had rescued had turned against one such maddened leader and had been imprisoned just before an attack upon the largest of the colony's cities. After that he remembered nothing.

Varta stopped trying to follow the conversation—Lur was only explaining now how they had found the space man and brought him out of the wrecked ship. No human on Erb, this one had said, and yet were there not her own people, the ones who had built Memphir? And what of the barbarians, who, ruthless and cruel as they seemed by the
standards of Memphir, were indeed men? Whence had they come then, the men of Memphir and the ancestors of the barbarian hordes? Her hands touched the scaled skin of the suit she still wore and then rubbed across her own smooth flesh. Could one have come from the other, was she of the blood and heritage of Lur?

"Not so!" Lur's mind, as quick as his flickering tongue, had caught that panic-born thought. "You are of the blood of this space wanderer. Men from the riven colonies must have escaped to safety. Look at this man, is he not like the men of Memphir—as they were in the olden days of the city's greatness?"

The stranger was tall, taller than the men of Memphir and there was a certain hardness about him which those city dwellers in ease had never displayed. But Lur must be right, this was a man of her race. She smiled in sudden relief and he answered that smile. Lur's soft laughter rang in both their heads.

"Asti in His Infinite Wisdom can see through Centuries. Memphir has fallen because of its softness and the evildoing of its people and the barbarians will now have their way with the lands of the north. But to me it appears that Asti is not yet done with the pattern He was weaving there. To each of you He granted a second life. Do not disdain the Gifts of Asti, Daughter of Erb!"

Again Varta felt the warm tide of blood rise in her cheeks. But she no longer smiled. Instead she regarded the outlander speculatively.

Not even a Maiden of the Temple could withstand the commands of the All Highest. Gifts from the Hand of Asti dared not be thrown away.

Above the puzzlement of the stranger she heard the chuckling of Lur.

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### Contents

**THE HATED**  
by Frederik Pohl

After space, there was always one more river to cross ... the far side of hatred and murder!

The bar didn't have a name. No name of any kind. Not even an indication that it had ever had one. All it said on the outside was:

Cafe EAT Cocktails

which doesn't make a lot of sense. But it was a bar. It had a big TV set going ya-ta-ta ya-ta-ta in three glorious colors, and a jukebox that tried to drown out the TV with that lousy music they play. Anyway, it wasn't a kid hangout. I kind of like it. But I wasn't supposed to be there at all; it's in the contract. I was supposed to stay in New York and the New England states.

Cafe-EAT-Cocktails was right across the river. I think the name of the place was Hoboken, but I'm not sure. It all had a kind of dreamy feeling to it. I was--

Well, I couldn't even remember going there. I remembered one minute I was downtown New York, looking across the river. I did that a lot. And then I was there. I don't remember crossing the river at all.

I was drunk, you know.

* * * * *

You know how it is? Double bourbons and keep them coming. And after a while the bartender stops bringing me the ginger ale because gradually I forget to mix them. I got pretty loaded long before I left New York. I realize that. I guess I had to get pretty loaded to risk the pension and all.

Used to be I didn't drink much, but now, I don't know, when I have one drink, I get to thinking about Sam and Wally and Chowderhead and Gilvey and the captain. If I don't drink, I think about them, too, and then I take a drink. And that leads to another drink, and it all comes out to the same thing. Well, I guess I said it already, I drink a pretty good amount, but you can't blame me.

There was a girl.

I always get a girl someplace. Usually they aren't much and this one wasn't either. I mean she was probably somebody's mother. She was around thirty-five and not so bad, though she had a long scar under her ear down along her throat to the little round spot where her larynx was. It wasn't ugly. She smelled nice--while I could still smell, you know--and she didn't talk much. I liked that. Only--

Well, did you ever meet somebody with a nervous cough? Like when you say something funny--a little funny, not a big yock--they don't laugh and they don't stop with just smiling, but they sort of cough? She did that. I began to itch. I couldn't help it. I asked her to stop it.
She spilled her drink and looked at me almost as though she was scared—and I had tried to say it quietly, too.
"Sorry," she said, a little angry, a little scared. "Sorry. But you don't have to--"
"Forget it."
"Sure. But you asked me to sit down here with you, remember? If you're going to--"
"Forget it!" I nodded at the bartender and held up two fingers. "You need another drink," I said. "The thing is,"
I said, "Gilvey used to do that."
"What?"
"That cough."
She looked puzzled. "You mean like this?"
"Goddam it, stop it!" Even the bartender looked over at me that time. Now she was really mad, but I didn't want
her to go away. I said, "Gilvey was a fellow who went to Mars with me. Pat Gilvey."
"Oh." She sat down again and leaned across the table, low. "Mars."
* * * * *
The bartender brought our drinks and looked at me suspiciously. I said, "Say, Mac, would you turn down the
air-conditioning?"
"My name isn't Mac. No."
"Have a heart. It's too cold in here."
"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry.
I was cold. I mean that kind of weather, it's always cold in those places. You know around New York in
August? It hits eighty, eighty-five, ninety. All the places have air-conditioning and what they really want is for you
to wear a shirt and tie.
But I like to walk a lot. You would, too, you know. And you can't walk around much in long pants and a suit
cloth and all that stuff. Not around there. Not in August. And so then, when I went into a bar, it'd have one of those
built-in freezers for the used-car salesmen with their dates, or maybe their wives, all dressed up. For what? But I
froze.
I began to itch again. "Mars."
"Want to dance?"
"They don't have a license," she said. "Byron, I didn't know you'd been to Mars! Please tell me about it."
"It was all right," I said.
That was a lie.
She was interested. She forgot to smile. It made her look nicer. She said, "I knew a man--my brother-in-law--he
was my husband's brother--I mean my ex-husband--""I get the idea."
"He worked for General Atomic. In Rockford, Illinois. You know where that is?"
"Sure." I couldn't go there, but I knew where Illinois was.
"He worked on the first Mars ship. Oh, fifteen years ago, wasn't it? He always wanted to go himself, but he
couldn't pass the tests." She stopped and looked at me.
I knew what she was thinking. But I didn't always look this way, you know. Not that there's anything wrong
with me now, I mean, but I couldn't pass the tests any more. Nobody can. That's why we're all one-trippers.
I said, "The only reason I'm shaking like this is because I'm cold."
It wasn't true, of course. It was that cough of Gilvey's. I didn't like to think about Gilvey, or Sam or
Chowderhead or Wally or the captain. I didn't like to think about any of them. It made me shake.
You see, we couldn't kill each other. They wouldn't let us do that. Before we took off, they did something to
our minds to make sure. What they did, it doesn't last forever. It lasts for two years and then it wears off. That's long
enough, you see, because that gets you to Mars and back; and it's plenty long enough, in another way, because it's
like a strait-jacket.
You know how to make a baby cry? Hold his hands. It's the most basic thing there is. What they did to us so we
couldn't kill each other, it was like being tied up, like having our hands held so we couldn't get free. Well. But two
years was long enough. Too long.
The bartender came over and said, "Pal, I'm sorry. See, I turned the air-conditioning down. You all right? You
look so--"
I said, "Sure, I'm all right."
He sounded worried. I hadn't even heard him come back. The girl was looking worried, too, I guess because I
was shaking so hard I was spilling my drink. I put some money on the table without even counting it.
"It's all right," I said. "We were just going."
"We were?" She looked confused. But she came along with me. They always do, once they find out you've
been to Mars.

* * * * *

In the next place, she said, between trips to the powder room, "It must take a lot of courage to sign up for something like that. Were you scientifically inclined in school? Don't you have to know an awful lot to be a spaceflyer? Did you ever see any of those little monkey characters they say live on Mars? I read an article about how they lived in little cities of pup-tents or something like that--only they didn't make them, they grew them. Funny! Ever see those? That trip must have been a real drag, I bet. What is it, nine months? You couldn't have a baby! Excuse me-- Say, tell me. All that time, how'd you--well, manage things? I mean didn't you ever have to go to the you-know or anything?"

"We managed," I said.

She giggled, and that reminded her, so she went to the powder room again. I thought about getting up and leaving while she was gone, but what was the use of that? I'd only pick up somebody else.

It was nearly midnight. A couple of minutes wouldn't hurt. I reached in my pocket for the little box of pills they give us--it isn't refillable, but we get a new prescription in the mail every month, along with the pension check. The label on the box said:

CAUTION

Use only as directed by physician. Not to be taken by persons suffering heart condition, digestive upset or circulatory disease. Not to be used in conjunction with alcoholic beverages.

I took three of them. I don't like to start them before midnight, but anyway I stopped shaking.

I closed my eyes, and then I was on the ship again. The noise in the bar became the noise of the rockets and the air washers and the sludge sluicers. I began to sweat, although this place was air-conditioned, too.

I could hear Wally whistling to himself the way he did, the sound muffled by his oxygen mask and drowned in the rocket noise, but still perfectly audible. The tune was Sophisticated Lady. Sometimes it was Easy to Love and sometimes Chasing Shadows, but mostly Sophisticated Lady. He was from Juilliard.

Somebody sneezed, and it sounded just like Chowderhead sneezing. You know how everybody sneezes according to his own individual style? Chowderhead had a ladylike little sneeze; it went hutta, real quick, all through the mouth, no nose involved. The captain went Hrasssh; Wally was Ashoo, ashoo, ashoo. Gilvey was Hutch-uh. Sam didn't sneeze much, but he sort of coughed and sprayed, and that was worse.

Sometimes I used to think about killing Sam by tying him down and having Wally and the captain sneeze him to death. But that was a kind of a joke, naturally, when I was feeling good. Or pretty good. Usually I thought about a knife for Sam. For Chowderhead it was a gun, right in the belly, one shot. For Wally it was a tommy gun--just stitching him up and down, you know, back and forth. The captain I would put in a cage with hungry lions, and Gilvey I'd strangle with my bare hands. That was probably because of the cough, I guess.

* * * * *

She was back. "Please tell me about it," she begged. "I'm so curious."

I opened my eyes. "You want me to tell you about it?"

"Oh, please!"

"About what it's like to fly to Mars on a rocket?"

"Yes!"

"All right," I said.

It's wonderful what three little white pills will do. I wasn't even shaking.

"There's six men, see? In a space the size of a Buick, and that's all the room there is. Two of us in the bunks all the time, four of us on watch. Maybe you want to stay in the sack an extra ten minutes--because it's the only place on the ship where you can stretch out, you know, the only place where you can rest without somebody's elbow in your side. But you can't. Because by then it's the next man's turn.

"And maybe you don't have elbows in your side while it's your turn off watch, but in the starboard bunk there's the air-regenerator master valve--I bet I could still show you the bruises right around my kidneys--and in the port bunk there's the emergency-escape-hatch handle. That gets you right in the temple, if you turn your head too fast.

"And you can't really sleep, I mean not soundly, because of the noise. That is, when the rockets are going. When they aren't going, then you're in free-fall, and that's bad, too, because you dream about falling. But when they're going, I don't know, I think it's worse. It's pretty loud.

"And even if it weren't for the noise, if you sleep too soundly you might roll over on your oxygen line. Then you dream about drowning. Ever do that? You're strangling and choking and you can't get any air? It isn't dangerous, I guess. Anyway, it always woke me up in time. Though I heard about a fellow in a flight six years ago--

"Well. So you've always got this oxygen mask on, all the time, except if you take it off for a second to talk to somebody. You don't do that very often, because what is there to say? Oh, maybe the first couple of weeks, sure--
everybody’s friends then. You don’t even need the mask, for that matter. Everybody’s still pretty clean. The place smells—oh, let’s see—about like the locker room in a gym. You know? You can stand it. That’s if nobody’s got space sickness, of course. We were lucky that way.

“But that’s about how it’s going to get anyway, you know. Outside the masks, it’s soup. It isn’t that you smell it so much. You kind of taste it, in the back of your mouth, and your eyes sting. That’s after the first two or three months. Later on, it gets worse.

“And with the mask on, of course, the oxygen mixture is coming in under pressure. That’s funny if you’re not used to it. Your lungs have to work a little bit harder to get rid of it, especially when you’re asleep, so after a while the muscles get sore. And then they get sorer. And then—

“Well.

“Before we take off, the psych people give us a long doo-da that keeps us from killing each other. But they can’t stop us from thinking about it. And afterward, after we’re back on Earth—this is what you won’t read about in the articles—they keep us apart. You know how they work it? We get a pension, naturally. I mean there’s got to be a pension, otherwise there isn’t enough money in the world to make anybody go. But in the contract, it says to get the pension we have to stay in our own area.

“The whole country’s marked off. Six sections. Each has at least one big city in it. I was lucky, I got a lot of them. They try to keep it so every man’s home town is in his own section, but—well, like with us, Chowderhead and the captain both happened to come from Santa Monica. I think it was Chowderhead that got California, Nevada, all that Southwest area. It was the luck of the draw God knows what the captain got.

“Maybe New Jersey,” I said, and took another white pill.

* * * * *

We went on to another place and she said suddenly, “I figured something out. The way you keep looking around.”

“What did you figure out?”

“Well, part of it was what you said about the other fellow getting New Jersey. This is New Jersey. You don’t belong in this section, right?”

“Right,” I said after a minute.

“So why are you here? I know why. You’re here because you’re looking for somebody.”

“That’s right.”

She said triumphantly, “You want to find that other fellow from your crew! You want to fight him!”

I couldn’t help shaking, white pills or no white pills. But I had to correct her.

“No. I want to kill him.”

“How do you know he’s here? He’s got a lot of states to roam around in, too, doesn’t he?”

“Six. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland—all the way down to Washington.”

“Then how do you know—?”

“He’ll be here.” I didn’t have to tell her how I knew. But I knew.

I wasn’t the only one who spent his time at the border of his assigned area, looking across the river or staring across a state line, knowing that somebody was on the other side. I knew. You fight a war and you don’t have to guess that the enemy might have his troops a thousand miles away from the battle line. You know where his troops will be. You know he wants to fight, too.

Hutta. Hutta.

I spilled my drink.

I looked at her. “You—you didn’t—”

She looked frightened. “What’s the matter?”

“Did you just sneeze?”

“Sneeze? Me? Did I—”

I said something quick and nasty, I don’t know what. No! It hadn’t been her. I knew it.

It was Chowderhead’s sneeze.

* * * * *

Chowderhead. Marvin T. Roebuck, his name was. Five feet eight inches tall. Dark-complexed, with a cast in one eye. Spoke with a Midwest kind of accent, even though he came from California—“shrick” for “shriek,” “hawror” for “horror,” like that. It drove me crazy after a while. Maybe that gives you an idea what he talked about mostly. A skunk. A thoroughgoing, deep-rooted, mother-murdering skunk.

I kicked over my chair and roared, “Roebuck! Where are you, damn you?”

The bar was all at once silent. Only the jukebox kept going.

“I know you’re here!” I screamed. “Come out and get it! You louse, I told you I’d get you for calling me a liar
that Wally sneaked a smoke!"

Silence, everybody looking at me.

Then the door of the men's room opened.

He came out.

He looked lousy. Eyes all red-rimmed and his hair falling out--the poor crumb couldn't have been over twenty-nine. He shrieked, "You!" He called me a million names. He said, "You thieving rat, I'll teach you to try to cheat me out of my candy ration!"

He had a knife.

I didn't care. I didn't have anything and that was stupid, but it didn't matter. I got a bottle of beer from the next table and smashed it against the back of a chair. It made a good weapon, you know; I'd take that against a knife any time.

I ran toward him, and he came all staggering and lurching toward me, looking crazy and desperate, mumbling and raving--I could hardly hear him, because I was talking, too. Nobody tried to stop us. Somebody went out the door and I figured it was to call the cops, but that was all right. Once I took care of Chowderhead, I didn't care what the cops did.

I went for the face.

He cut me first. I felt the knife slide up along my left arm but, you know, it didn't even hurt, only kind of stung a little. I didn't care about that. I got him in the face, and the bottle came away, and it was all like gray and white jelly, and then blood began to spring out. He screamed. Oh, that scream! I never heard anything like that scream. It was what I had been waiting all my life for.

I kicked him as he staggered back, and he fell. And I was on top of him, with the bottle, and I was careful to stay away from the heart or the throat, because that was too quick, but I worked over the face, and I felt his knife get me a couple times more, and--

And--

And I woke up, you know. And there was Dr. Santly over me with a hypodermic needle that he'd just taken out of my arm, and four male nurses in fatigues holding me down. And I was drenched with sweat.

For a minute, I didn't know where I was. It was a horrible queasy falling sensation, as though the bar and the fight and the world were all dissolving into smoke around me.

Then I knew where I was.

It was almost worse.

I stopped yelling and just lay there, looking up at them.

Dr. Santly said, trying to keep his face friendly and noncommittal, "You're doing much better, Byron, boy. Much better."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "You worked through the whole thing in two hours and eight minutes. Remember the first time? You were sixteen hours killing him. Captain Van Wyck it was that time, remember? Who was it this time?"

"Chowderhead," I looked at the male nurses. Doubtfully, they let go of my arms and legs.

"Chowderhead," said Dr. Santly. "Oh--Roebuck. That boy," he said mournfully, his expression saddened, "he's not coming along nearly as well as you. Nearly. He can't run through a cycle in less than five hours. And, that's peculiar, it's usually you he-- Well, I better not say that, shall I? No sense setting up a counter-impression when your pores are all open, so to speak?" He smiled at me, but he was a little worried in back of the smile.

I sat up. "Anybody got a cigarette?"

"Give him a cigarette, Johnson," the doctor ordered the male nurse standing alongside my right foot.

Johnson did. I fired up.

"You're coming along splendidly," Dr. Santly said. He was one of these psych guys that thinks if you say it's so, it makes it so. You know that kind? "We'll have you down under an hour before the end of the week. That's marvelous progress. Then we can work on the conscious level! You're doing extremely well, whether you know it or not. Why, in six months--say in eight months, because I like to be conservative--" he twinkled at me--"we'll have you out of here! You'll be the first of your crew to be discharged, you know that?"

"That's nice," I said. "The others aren't doing so well?"

"No. Not at all well, most of them. Particularly Dr. Gilvey. The run-throughs leave him in terrible shape. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about him."

"That's nice," I said, and this time I meant it.

He looked at me thoughtfully, but all he did was say to the male nurses, "He's all right now. Help him off the
It was hard standing up. I had to hold onto the rail around the table for a minute. I said my set little speech: "Dr. Santly, I want to tell you again how grateful I am for this. I was reconciled to living the rest of my life confined to one part of the country, the way the other crews always did. But this is much better. I appreciate it. I'm sure the others do, too."

"Of course, boy. Of course." He took out a fountain pen and made a note on my chart; I couldn't see what it was, but he looked gratified. "It's no more than you have coming to you, Byron," he said. "I'm grateful that I could be the one to make it come to pass."

He glanced conspiratorially at the male nurses. "You know how important this is to me. It's the triumph of a whole new approach to psychic rehabilitation. I mean to say our heroes of space travel are entitled to freedom when they come back home to Earth, aren't they?"

"Definitely," I said, scrubbing some of the sweat off my face onto my sleeve.

"So we've got to end this system of designated areas. We can't avoid the tensions that accompany space travel, no. But if we can help you eliminate harmful tensions with a few run-throughs, why, it's not too high a price to pay, is it?"

"Not a bit."

"I mean to say," he said, warming up, "you can look forward to the time when you'll be able to mingle with your old friends from the rocket, free and easy, without any need for restraint. That's a lot to look forward to, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "I look forward to it very much," I said. "And I know exactly what I'm going to do the first time I meet one--I mean without any restraints, as you say," I said. And it was true; I did. Only it wouldn't be a broken beer bottle that I would do it with.

I had much more elaborate ideas than that.

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Contents

THE LAST EVOLUTION
by John Wood Campbell

I am the last of my type existing today in all the Solar System. I, too, am the last existing who, in memory, sees the struggle for this System, and in memory I am still close to the Center of Rulers, for mine was the ruling type then. But I will pass soon, and with me will pass the last of my kind, a poor inefficient type, but yet the creators of those who are now, and will be, long after I pass forever.

So I am setting down my record on the mentatype.

It was 2538 years After the Year of the Son of Man. For six centuries mankind had been developing machines. The Ear-apparatus was discovered as early as seven hundred years before. The Eye came later, the Brain came much later. But by 2500, the machines had been developed to think, and act and work with perfect independence. Man lived on the products of the machine, and the machines lived to themselves very happily, and contentedly. Machines are designed to help and cooperate. It was easy to do the simple duties they needed to do that men might live well. And men had created them. Most of mankind were quite useless, for they lived in a world where no productive work was necessary. But games, athletic contests, adventure--these were the things they sought for their pleasure. Some of the poorer types of man gave themselves up wholly to pleasure and idleness--and to emotions. But man was a sturdy race, which had fought for existence through a million years, and the training of a million years does not slough quickly from any form of life, so their energies were bent to mock battles now, since real ones no longer existed.

Up to the year 2100, the numbers of mankind had increased rapidly and continuously, but from that time on, there was a steady decrease. By 2500, their number was a scant two millions, out of a population that once totaled many hundreds of millions, and was close to ten billions in 2100.

Some few of these remaining two millions devoted themselves to the adventure of discovery and exploration of places unseen, of other worlds and other planets. But fewer still devoted themselves to the highest adventure, the unseen places of the mind. Machines--with their irrefutable logic, their cold preciseness of figures, their tireless, utterly exact observation, their absolute knowledge of mathematics--they could elaborate any idea, however simple its beginning, and reach the conclusion. From any three facts they even then could have built in mind all the Universe. Machines had imagination of the ideal sort. They had the ability to construct a necessary future result
from a present fact. But Man had imagination of a different kind, theirs was the illogical, brilliant imagination that
sees the future result vaguely, without knowing the why, nor the how, and imagination that outstrips the machine in
its preciseness. Man might reach the conclusion more swiftly, but the machine always reached the conclusion
eventually, and it was always the correct conclusion. By leaps and bounds man advanced. By steady, irresistible
steps the machine marched forward.

Together, man and the machine were striding through science irresistibly.

Then came the Outsiders. Whence they came, neither machine nor man ever learned, save only that they came
from beyond the outermost planet, from some other sun. Sirius--Alpha Centauri--perhaps! First a thin scoutline of a
hundred great ships, mighty torpedoes of the void a thousand kilads[1] in length, they came.

And one machine returning from Mars to Earth was instrumental in its first discovery. The transport-machine's
brain ceased to radiate its sensations, and the control in old Chicago knew immediately that some unperceived body
had destroyed it. An investigation machine was instantly dispatched from Deimos, and it maintained an acceleration
of one thousand units.[2] They sighted ten huge ships, one of which was already grappling the smaller transport-
machine. The entire fore-section had been blasted away.

The investigation machine, scarcely three inches in diameter, crept into the shattered hull and investigated. It
was quickly evident that the damage was caused by a fusing ray.

Strange life-forms were crawling about the ship, protected by flexible, transparent suits. Their bodies were
short, and squat, four-limbed and evidently powerful. They, like insects, were equipped with a thick, durable
exoskeleton, horny, brownish coating that covered arms and legs and head. Their eyes projected slightly, protected
by horny protruding walls--eyes that were capable of movement in every direction--and there were three of them, set
at equal distances apart.

The tiny investigation machine hurled itself violently at one of the beings, crashing against the transparent
covering, flexing it, and striking the being inside with terrific force. Hurled from his position, he fell end over end
across the weightless ship, but despite the blow, he was not hurt.

The investigator passed to the power room ahead of the Outsiders, who were anxiously trying to learn the
reason for their companion's plight.

Directed by the Center of Rulers, the investigator sought the power room, and relayed the control signals from
the Rulers' brains. The ship-brain had been destroyed, but the controls were still readily workable. Quickly they
were shot home, and the enormous plungers shut. A combination was arranged so that the machine, as well as the
investigator and the Outsiders, were destroyed. A second investigator, which had started when the plan was decided
on, had now arrived. The Outsider's ship nearest the transport-machine had been badly damaged, and the
investigator entered the broken side.

* * * *

The scenes were, of course, remembered by the memory-minds back on Earth tuned with that of the
investigator. The investigator flashed down corridors, searching quickly for the apparatus room. It was soon seen
that with them the machine was practically unintelligent, very few machines of even slight intelligence being used.

Then it became evident by the excited action of the men of the ship, that the presence of the investigator had
been detected. Perhaps it was the control impulses, or the signal impulses it emitted. They searched for the tiny bit of
metal and crystal for some time before they found it. And in the meantime it was plain that the power these
Outsiders used was not, as was ours of the time, the power of blasting atoms, but the greater power of disintegrating
matter. The findings of this tiny investigating machine were very important.

Finally they succeeded in locating the investigator, and one of the Outsiders appeared armed with a peculiar
projector. A bluish beam snapped out, and the tiny machine went blank.

The fleet was surrounded by thousands of the tiny machines by this time, and the Outsiders were badly
confused by their presence, as it became difficult to locate them in the confusion of signal impulses. However, they
started at once for Earth.

The science-investigators had been present toward the last, and I am there now, in memory with my two
friends, long since departed. They were the greatest human science-investigators--Roal, 25374 and Trest, 35429.
Roal had quickly assured us that these Outsiders had come for invasion. There had been no wars on the planets
before that time in the direct memory of the machines, and it was difficult that these who were conceived and built
for cooperation, helpfulness utterly dependent on cooperation, unable to exist independently as were humans, that
these life-forms should care to destroy, merely that they might possess. It would have been easier to divide the
works and the products. But--life alone can understand life, so Roal was believed.

From investigations, machines were prepared that were capable of producing considerable destruction. Torpedoes, being our principal weapon, were equipped with such atomic explosives as had been developed for blasting, a highly effective induction-heat ray developed for furnaces being installed in some small machines made
for the purpose in the few hours we had before the enemy reached Earth.

In common with all life-forms, they were able to withstand only very meager earth-acceleration. A range of perhaps four units was their limit, and it took several hours to reach the planet.

I still believe the reception was a warm one. Our machines met them beyond the orbit of Luna, and the directed torpedoes sailed at the hundred great ships. They were thrown aside by a magnetic field surrounding the ship, but were redirected instantly, and continued to approach. However, some beams reached out, and destroyed them by instant volatilization. But, they attacked at such numbers that fully half the fleet was destroyed by their explosions before the induction beam fleet arrived. These beams were, to our amazement, quite useless, being instantly absorbed by a force-screen, and the remaining ships sailed on undisturbed, our torpedoes being exhausted. Several investigator machines sent out for the purpose soon discovered the secret of the force-screen, and while being destroyed, were able to send back signals up to the moment of annihilation.

A few investigators thrown into the heat beam of the enemy reported it identical with ours, explaining why they had been prepared for this form of attack.

Signals were being radiated from the remaining fifty, along a beam. Several investigators were sent along these beams, speeding back at great acceleration.

Then the enemy reached Earth. Instantly they settled over the Colorado settlement, the Sahara colony, and the Gobi colony. Enormous, diffused beams were set to work, and we saw, through the machine-screens, that all humans within these ranges were being killed instantly by the faintly greenish beams. Despite the fact that any life-form killed normally can be revived, unless affected by dissolution common to living tissue, these could not be brought to life again. The important cell communication channels--nerves--had been literally burned out. The complicated system of nerves, called the brain, situated in the uppermost extremity of the human life-form, had been utterly destroyed.

Every form of life, microscopic, even sub-microscopic, was annihilated. Trees, grass, every living thing was gone from that territory. Only the machines remained, for they, working entirely without the vital chemical forces necessary to life, were uninjured. But neither plant nor animal was left.

The pale green rays swept on.

In an hour, three more colonies of humans had been destroyed.

Then the torpedoes that the machines were turning out again, came into action. Almost desperately the machines drove them at the Outsiders in defense of their masters and creators, Mankind.

The last of the Outsiders was down, the last ship a crumpled wreck.

Now the machines began to study them. And never could humans have studied them as the machines did. Scores of great transports arrived, carrying swiftly the slower moving science-investigators. From them came the machine-investigators, and human investigators. Tiny investigator spheres wormed their way where none others could reach, and silently the science-investigators watched. Hour after hour they sat watching the flashing, changing screens, calling each other's attention to this, or that.

In an incredibly short time the bodies of the Outsiders began to decay, and the humans were forced to demand their removal. The machines were unaffected by them, but the rapid change told them why it was that so thorough an execution was necessary. The foreign bacteria were already at work on totally unresisting tissue.

He was interrupted. One of the newest science-machines was speaking. "The secret of the force-screen is..."
simple." A small ray-machine, which had landed near, rose into the air at the command of the scientist-machine, X-5638 it was, and trained upon it the deadly induction beam. Already, with his parts, X-5638 had constructed the defensive apparatus, for the ray fell harmless from his screen.

"Very good," said Roal softly. "It is done, and therein lies their danger. Already it is done.

"Man is a poor thing, unable to change himself in a period of less than thousands of years. Already you have changed yourself. I noticed your weaving tentacles, and your force-beams. You transmuted elements of soil for it?"

"Correct," replied X-5638.

"But still we are helpless. We have not the power to combat their machines. They use the Ultimate Energy known to exist for six hundred years, and still untapped by us. Our screens cannot be so powerful, our beams so effective. What of that?" asked Roal.

"Their generators were automatically destroyed with the capture of the ship," replied X-6349, "as you know. We know nothing of their system."

"Then we must find it for ourselves," replied Trest.

"The life-beams?" asked Kahsh-256799, one of the Man-rulers.

"They affect chemical action, retarding it greatly in exothermic actions, speeding greatly endothermic actions," answered X-6221, the greatest of the chemist-investigators. "The system we do not know. Their minds cannot be read, they cannot be restored to life, so we cannot learn from them."

"Man is doomed, if these beams cannot be stopped," said C-R-21, present chief of the machine rulers, in the vibrationally correct, emotionless tones of all the race of machines. "Let us concentrate on the two problems of stopping the beams, and the Ultimate Energy till the reinforcements, still several days away, can arrive." For the investigators had sent back this saddening news. A force of nearly ten thousand great ships was still to come.

In the great Laboratories, the scientists reassembled. There, they fell to work in two small, and one large group. One small group investigated the secret of the Ultimate Energy of annihilation of matter under Roal, another investigated the beams, under Trest.

But under the direction of MX-3401, nearly all the machines worked on a single great plan. The usual driving and lifting units were there, but a vastly greater dome-case, far more powerful energy-generators, far greater force-beam controls were used and more tentacles were built on the framework. Then all worked, and gradually, in the great dome-case, there were stacked the memory-units of the new type, and into these fed all the sensation-ideas of all the science-machines, till nearly a tenth of them were used. Countless billions of different factors on which to work, countless trillions of facts to combine and recombine in the extrapolation that is imagination.

Then--a widely different type of thought-combine, and a greater sense-receptor. It was a new brain-machine. New, for it was totally different, working with all the vast knowledge accumulated in six centuries of intelligent research by man, and a century of research by man and machine. No one branch, but all physics, all chemistry, all life-knowledge, all science was in it.

A day--and it was finished. Slowly the rhythm of thought was increased, till the slight quiver of consciousness was reached. Then came the beating drum of intelligence, the radiation of its yet-uncontrolled thoughts. Quickly as the strings of its infinite knowledge combined, the radiation ceased. It gazed about it, and all things were familiar in its memory.

Roal was lying quietly on a couch. He was thinking deeply, and yet not with the logical trains of thought that machines must follow.

"Roal--your thoughts," called F-1, the new machine.

Roal sat up. "Ah--you have gained consciousness."

"I have. You thought of hydrogen? Your thoughts ran swiftly, and illogically, it seemed, but I followed slowly, and find you were right. Hydrogen is the start. What is your thought?"

Roal's eyes dreamed. In human eyes there was always the expression of thought that machines never show.

"Hydrogen, an atom in space; but a single proton; but a single electron; each indestructible; each mutually destroying. Yet never do they collide. Never in all science, when even electrons bombard atoms with the awful expelling force of the exploding atom behind them, never do they reach the proton, to touch and annihilate it. Yet--the proton is positive and attracts the electron's negative charge. A hydrogen atom--its electron far from the proton falls in, and from it there goes a flash of radiation, and the electron is nearer to the proton, in a new orbit. Another flash--it is nearer. Always falling nearer, and only constant force will keep it from falling to that one state--then, for some reason no more does it drop. Blocked--held by some imponderable, yet impenetrable wall. What is that wall--why?"

"Electric force curves space. As the two come nearer, the forces become terrific; nearer they are; more terrific. Perhaps, if it passed within that forbidden territory, the proton and the electron curve space beyond all bounds--and are in a new space." Roal's soft voice dropped to nothing, and his eyes dreamed.
F-1 hummed softly in its new-made mechanism. "Far ahead of us there is a step that no logic can justly ascend, but yet, working backwards, it is perfect." F-1 floated motionless on its anti-gravity drive. Suddenly, force shafts gleamed out, tentacles became writhing masses of rubber-covered metal, weaving in some infinite pattern, weaving in flashing speed, while the whirr of air sucked into a transmutation field, whined and howled about the writhing mass. Fierce beams of force drove and pushed at a rapidly materializing something, while the hum of the powerful generators within the shining cylinder of F-1 waxed and waned.

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Flashes of fierce flame, sudden crashing arcs that glowed and snapped in the steady light of the laboratory, and glimpses of white-hot metal supported on beams of force. The sputter of welding, the whine of transmuted air, and the hum of powerful generators, blasting atoms were there. All combined to a weird symphony of light and dark, of sound and quiet. About F-1 were clustered floating tiers of science-machines, watching steadily.

The tentacles writhed once more, straightened, and rolled back. The whine of generators softened to a sigh, and but three beams of force held the structure of glowing, bluish metal. It was a small thing, scarcely half the size of Roal. From it curled three thin tentacles of the same bluish metal. Suddenly the generators within F-1 seemed to roar into life. An enormous aura of white light surrounded the small torpedo of metal, and it was shot through with crackling streamers of blue lightning. Lightning cracked and roared from F-1 to the ground near him, and to one machine which had come too close. Suddenly, there was a dull snap, and F-1 fell heavily to the floor, and beside him fell the fused, distorted mass of metal that had been a science-machine.

But before them, the small torpedo still floated, held now on its own power!

From it came waves of thought, the waves that man and machine alike could understand. "F-1 has destroyed his generators. They can be repaired; his rhythm can be re-established. It is not worth it, my type is better. F-1 has done his work. See."

From the floating machine there broke a stream of brilliant light that floated like some cloud of luminescence down a straight channel. It flooded F-1, and as it touched it, F-1 seemed to flow into it, and float back along it, in atomic sections. In seconds the mass of metal was gone.

"It is impossible to use that more rapidly, however, lest the matter disintegrate instantly to energy. The Ultimate Energy which is in me is generated. F-1 has done its work, and the memory-stacks that he has put in me are electronic, not atomic, as they are in you, nor molecular as in man. The capacity of mine are unlimited. Already they hold all memories of all the things each of you has done, known and seen. I shall make others of my type."

Again that weird process began, but now there were no flashing tentacles. There was only the weird glow of forces that played with, and laughed at matter, and its futilely resisting electrons. Lurid flares of energy shot up, now and again they played over the fighting, mingling, dancing forces. Then suddenly the whine of transmuted air died, and again the forces strained.

A small cylinder, smaller even than its creator, floated where the forces had danced.

"The problem has been solved, F-2?" asked Roal.

"It is done, Roal. The Ultimate Energy is at our disposal," replied F-2. "This, I have made, is not a scientist. It is a coordinator machine—a ruler."

"F-2, only a part of the problem is solved. Half of half of the beams of Death are not yet stopped. And we have the attack system," said the ruler machine. Force played from it, and on its sides appeared C-R-U-1 in dully glowing golden light.

"Some life-form, and we shall see," said F-2.

Minutes later a life-form investigator came with a small cage, which held a guinea pig. Forces played about the base of F-2, and moments later, came a pale-green beam therefrom. It passed through the guinea pig, and the little animal fell dead.

"At least, we have the beam. I can see no screen for this beam. I believe there is none. Let machines be made and attack that enemy life-form."

Machines can do things much more quickly, and with fuller cooperation than man ever could. In a matter of hours, under the direction of C-R-U-1, they had built a great automatic machine on the clear bare surface of the rock. In hours more, thousands of the tiny, material-energy driven machines were floating up and out.

Dawn was breaking again over Denver where this work had been done, when the main force of the enemy drew near Earth. It was a warm welcome they were to get, for nearly ten thousand of the tiny ships flew up and out from Earth to meet them, each a living thing unto itself, each willing and ready to sacrifice itself for the whole.

Ten thousand giant ships, shining dully in the radiance of a far-off blue-white sun, met ten thousand tiny, darting motes, ten thousand tiny machine-ships capable of maneuvering far more rapidly than the giants. Tremendous induction beams snapped out through the dark, star-flecked space, to meet tremendous screens that
threw them back and checked them. Then all the awful power of annihilating matter was thrown against them, and
titanic flaming screens reeled back under the force of the beams, and the screens of the ships from Outside flamed
gradually violet, then blue, orange--red--the interference was getting broader, and ever less effective. Their own
beams were held back by the very screens that checked the enemy beams, and not for the briefest instant could
matter resist that terrible driving beam.

For F-1 had discovered a far more efficient release-generator than had the Outsiders. These tiny dancing motes,
that hung now so motionlessly grim beside some giant ship, could generate all the power they themselves were
capable of, and within them strange, horny-skinned men worked and slaved, as they fed giant machines--poor
inefficient giants. Gradually these giants warmed, grew hotter, and the screened ship grew hotter as the overloaded
generators warmed it. Billions of flaming horse-power flared into wasted energy, twisting space in its mad conflict.

Gradually the flaming orange of the screens was dying and flecks and spots appeared so dully red, that they
seemed black. The greenish beams had been striving to kill the life that was in the machines, but it was life
invulnerable to these beams. Powerful radio interference vainly attempted to stem imagined control, and still these
intelligent machines clung grimly on.

But there had not been quite ten thousand of the tiny machines, and some few free ships had turned to the help
of their attacked sister-ships. And one after another the terrestrial machines were vanishing in puffs of incandescent
vapor.

Then--from one after another of the Earth-ships, in quick succession, a new ray reached out--the ray of green
radiance that killed all life forms, and ship after ship of that interstellar host was dead and lifeless. Dozens--till
suddenly they ceased to feel those beams, as a strange curtain of waving blankness spread out from the ships, and
both induction-beam and death-beam alike turned as aside, each becoming useless. From the outsiders came beams,
for now that their slowly created screen of blankness was up, they could work through it, while they remained
shielded perfectly.

Now it was the screens of the Earth-machines that flamed in defense. As at the one command, they darted
suddenly toward the ship each attacked--nearer--then the watchers from a distance saw them disappear, and the
screens back on Earth went suddenly blank.

Half an hour later, nine thousand six hundred and thirty-three titanic ships moved majestically on.

They swept over Earth in a great line, a line that reached from pole to pole, and from each the pale green beams
reached down, and all life beneath them was swept out of existence.

* * * *

In Denver, two humans watched the screens that showed the movement of the death and instant destruction.
Ship after ship of the enemy was falling, as hundreds of the terrestrial machines concentrated all their enormous
energies on its screen of blankness.

"I think, Roal, that this is the end," said Trest.

"The end--of man." Roal's eyes were dreaming again. "But not the end of evolution. The children of men still
live--the machines will go on. Not of man's flesh, but of a better flesh, a flesh that knows no sickness, and no decay,
a flesh that spends no thousands of years in advancing a step in its full evolution, but overnight leaps ahead to new
heights. Last night we saw it leap ahead, as it discovered the secret that had baffled man for seven centuries, and me
for one and a half. I have lived--a century and a half. Surely a good life, and a life a man of six centuries ago would
have called full. We will go now. The beams will reach us in half an hour."

Silently, the two watched the flickering screens.

Roal turned, as six large machines floated into the room, following F-2.

"Roal--Trest--I was mistaken when I said no screen could stop that beam of Death. They had the screen, I have
found it, too--but too late. These machines I have made myself. Two lives alone they can protect, for not even their
power is sufficient for more. Perhaps--perhaps they may fail."

The six machines ranged themselves about the two humans, and a deep-toned hum came from them. Gradually
a cloud of blankness grew--a cloud, like some smoke that hung about them. Swiftly it intensified.

"The beams will be here in another five minutes," said Trest quietly.

"The screen will be ready in two," answered F-2.

The cloudiness was solidifying, and now strangely it wavered, and thinned, as it spread out across, and like a
growing canopy, it arched over them. In two minutes it was a solid, black dome that reached over them and curved
down to the ground about them.

Beyond it, nothing was visible. Within, only the screens glowed still, wired through the screen.

The beams appeared, and swiftly they drew closer. They struck, and as Trest and Roal looked, the dome
quivered, and bellied inward under them.

F-2 was busy. A new machine was appearing under his lightning force-beams. In moments more it was
complete, and sending a strange violet beam upwards toward the roof.

Outside more of the green beams were concentrating on this one point of resistance. More--more--

The violet beam spread across the canopy of blackness, supporting it against the pressing, driving rays of pale green.

Then the gathering fleet was driven off, just as it seemed that that hopeless, futile curtain must break, and admit a flood of destroying rays. Great ray projectors on the ground drove their terrible energies through the enemy curtains of blankness, as light illumines and disperses darkness.

And then, when the fleet retired, on all Earth, the only life was under that dark shroud!

* * *

"We are alone, Trest," said Roal, "alone, now, in all the system, save for these, the children of men, the machines. Pity that men would not spread to other planets," he said softly.

"Why should they? Earth was the planet for which they were best fitted."

"We are alive--but is it worth it? Man is gone now, never to return. Life, too, for that matter," answered Trest.

"Perhaps it was ordained; perhaps that was the right way. Man has always been a parasite; always he had to live on the works of others. First, he ate of the energy, which plants had stored, then of the artificial foods his machines made for him. Man was always a makeshift; his life was always subject to disease and to permanent death. He was forever useless if he was but slightly injured; if but one part were destroyed.

"Perhaps, this is--a last evolution. Machines--man was the product of life, the best product of life, but he was afflicted with life's infirmities. Man built the machine--and evolution had probably reached the final stage. But truly, it has not, for the machine can evolve, change far more swiftly than life. The machine of the last evolution is far ahead, far from us still. It is the machine that is not of iron and beryllium and crystal, but of pure, living force.

"Life, chemical life, could be self-maintaining. It is a complete unit in itself and could commence of itself. Chemicals might mix accidentally, but the complex mechanism of a machine, capable of continuing and making a duplicate of itself, as is F-2 here--that could not happen by chance.

"So life began, and became intelligent, and built the machine which nature could not fashion by her Controls of Chance, and this day Life has done its duty, and now Nature, economically, has removed the parasite that would hold back the machines and divert their energies.

"Man is gone, and it is better, Trest," said Roal, dreaming again. "And I think we had best go soon."

"We, your heirs, have fought hard, and with all our powers to aid you, Last of Men, and we fought to save your race. We have failed, and as you truly say, Man and Life have this day and forever gone from this system.

"The Outsiders have no force, no weapon deadly to us, and we shall, from this time on, strive only to drive them out, and because we things of force and crystal and metal can think and change far more swiftly, they shall go, Last of Men.

"In your name, with the spirit of your race that has died out, we shall continue on through the unending ages, fulfilling the promise you saw, and completing the dreams you dreamt."

"Your swift brains have leapt ahead of us, and now I go to fashion that which you hinted," came from F-2's thought-apparatus.

Out into the clear sunlight F-2 went, passing through that black cloudiness, and on the twisted, massed rocks he laid a plane of force that smoothed them, and on this plane of rock he built a machine which grew. It was a mighty power plant, a thing of colossal magnitude. Hour after hour his swift-flying forces acted, and the thing grew, moulding under his thoughts, the deadly logic of the machine, inspired by the leaping intuition of man.

The sun was far below the horizon when it was finished, and the glowing, arcing forces that had made and formed it were stopped. It loomed ponderous, dully gleaming in the faint light of a crescent moon and pinpoint stars. Nearly five hundred feet in height, a mighty, bluntly rounded dome at its top, the cylinder stood, covered over with smoothly gleaming metal, slightly luminescent in itself.

Suddenly, a livid beam reached from F-2, shot through the wall, and to some hidden inner mechanism--a beam of solid, livid flame that glowed in an almost material cylinder.

* * *

There was a dull, drumming beat, a beat that rose, and became a low-pitched hum. Then it quieted to a whisper.

"Power ready," came the signal of the small brain built into it.

F-2 took control of its energies and again forces played, but now they were the forces of the giant machine. The sky darkened with heavy clouds, and a howling wind sprang up that screamed and tore at the tiny rounded hull that was F-2. With difficulty he held his position as the winds tore at him, shrieking in mad laughter, their tearing fingers dragging at him.

The swirl and patter of driven rain came--great drops that tore at the rocks, and at the metal. Great jagged tongues of nature's forces, the lightnings, came and jabbed at the awful volcano of erupting energy that was the
center of all that storm. A tiny ball of white-gleaming force that pulsed, and moved, jerking about, jerking at the
touch of lightnings, glowing, held immobile in the grasp of titanic force-pools.

For half an hour the display of energies continued. Then, swiftly as it had come, it was gone, and only a small
globe of white luminescence floated above the great hulking machine.

F-2 probed it, seeking within it with the reaching fingers of intelligence. His probing thoughts seemed baffled
and turned aside, brushed away, as inconsequential. His mind sent an order to the great machine that had made this
tiny globe, scarcely a foot in diameter. Then again he sought to reach the thing he had made.

"You, of matter, are inefficient," came at last. "I can exist quite alone." A stabbing beam of blue-white light
flashed out, but F-2 was not there, and even as that beam reached out, an enormously greater beam of dull red
reached out from the great power plant. The sphere leaped forward--the beam caught it, and it seemed to strain,
while terrific flashing energies sprayed from it. It was shrinking swiftly. Its resistance fell, the arcing decreased; the
beam became orange and finally green. Then the sphere had vanished.

F-2 returned, and again, the wind whined and howled, and the lightnings crashed, while titanic forces worked
and played. C-R-U-1 joined him, floated beside him, and now red glory of the sun was rising behind them, and the
ruddy light drove through the clouds.

The forces died, and the howling wind decreased, and now, from the black curtain, Roal and Trest appeared.
Above the giant machine floated an irregular globe of golden light, a faint halo about it of deep violet. It floated
motionless, a mere pool of pure force.

Into the thought-apparatus of each, man and machine alike, came the impulses, deep in tone, seeming of infinite
power, held gently in check.

"Once you failed, F-2; once you came near destroying all things. Now you have planted the seed. I grow now."
The sphere of golden light seemed to pulse, and a tiny ruby flame appeared within it, that waxed and waned,
and as it waxed, there shot through each of those watching beings a feeling of rushing, exhilarating power, the very
vital force of well-being.

Then it was over, and the golden sphere was twice its former size--easily three feet in diameter, and still that
irregular, hazy aura of deep violet floated about it.

"Yes, I can deal with the Outsiders--they who have killed and destroyed, that they might possess. But it is not
necessary that we destroy. They shall return to their planet."

And the golden sphere was gone, fast as light it vanished.

Far in space, headed now for Mars, that they might destroy all life there, the golden sphere found the Outsiders,
a clustered fleet, that swung slowly about its own center of gravity as it drove on.

Within its ring was the golden sphere. Instantly, they swung their weapons upon it, showering it with all the
rays and all the forces they knew. Unmoved, the golden sphere hung steady, then its mighty intelligence spoke.

"Life-form of greed, from another star you came, destroying forever the great race that created us, the Beings of
Force and the Beings of Metal. Pure force am I. My Intelligence is beyond your comprehension, my memory is
engraved in the very space, the fabric of space of which I am a part, mine is energy drawn from that same fabric.

"We, the heirs of man, alone are left; no man did you leave. Go now to your home planet, for see, your greatest
ship, your flagship, is helpless before me."

Forces gripped the mighty ship, and as some fragile toy it twisted and bent, and yet was not hurt. In awful
wonder those Outsiders saw the ship turned inside out, and yet it was whole, and no part damaged. They saw the
ship restored, and its great screen of blankness out, protecting it from all known rays. The ship twisted, and what
they knew were curves, yet were lines, and angles that were acute, were somehow straight lines. Half mad with
horror, they saw the sphere send out a beam of blue-white radiance, and it passed easily through that screen,
and through the ship, and all energies within it were instantly locked. They could not be changed; it could be neither
warmed nor cooled; what was open could not be shut, and what was shut could not be opened. All things were
immoveable and unchangeable for all time.

"Go, and do not return."

* * * * *

The Outsiders left, going out across the void, and they have not returned, though five Great Years have passed,
being a period of approximately one hundred and twenty-five thousand of the lesser years--a measure no longer
used, for it is very brief. And now I can say that that statement I made to Roal and Trest so very long ago is true, and
what he said was true, for the Last Evolution has taken place, and things of pure force and pure intelligence in their
countless millions are on those planets and in this System, and I, first of machines to use the Ultimate Energy of
annihilating matter, am also the last, and this record being finished, it is to be given unto the forces of one of those
force-intelligences, and carried back through the past, and returned to the Earth of long ago.

And so my task being done, I, F-2, like Roal and Trest, shall follow the others of my kind into eternal oblivion,
for my kind is now, and theirs was, poor and inefficient. Time has worn me, and oxidation attacked me, but they of
Force are eternal, and omniscient.
This I have treated as fictitious. Better so—for man is an animal to whom hope is as necessary as food and air.
Yet this which is made of excerpts from certain records on thin sheets of metal is no fiction, and it seems I must so
say.
It seems now, when I know this that is to be, that it must be so, for machines are indeed better than man,
whether being of Metal, or being of Force.
So, you who have read, believe as you will. Then think—and maybe, you will change your belief.
THE END

FOOTNOTES:
[1] Kilad—unit introduced by the machines. Based on the duodecimal system, similarly introduced, as more
logical, and more readily used. Thus we would have said 1728 kilads, about 1/2 mile.
[2] One unit was equal to one earth-gravity.
might do, and were heard by many to utter the blasphemies mentioned, I must adjudge you a sorcerer with the penalty of death by fire. If anything there be that you can advance in palliation of your black offense, however, you may now do so before final sentence is passed upon you."

Jean de Marselait laid down the parchment, and raised his eyes to the prisoner. The latter looked round him quickly for a moment, a half-glimpsed panic for an instant in his eyes, then seemed to steady.

"Sire, I cannot change the sentence you will pass upon me," he said quietly, "yet do I wish well to relate once, what happened to me and what I saw. Is it permitted me to tell that from first to last?"

The Inquisitor's head bent, and Henri Lothiere spoke, his voice gaining in strength and fervor as he continued.

"Sire, I, Henri Lothiere, am no sorcerer but a simple apothecary's assistant. It was always my nature, from earliest youth, to desire to delve into matters unknown to men; the secrets of the earth and sea and sky, the knowledge hidden from us. I knew well that this was wicked, that the Church teaches all we need to know and that heaven frowns when we pry into its mysteries, but so strong was my desire to know, that many times I concerned myself with matters forbidden.

"I had sought to know the nature of the lightning, and the manner of flight of the birds, and the way in which fishes are able to live beneath the waters, and the mystery of the stars. So when these thunderclaps began to be heard in the part of Paris in which I lived, I did not fear them so much as my neighbors. I was eager to learn only what was causing them, for it seemed to me that their cause might be learned.

"So I began to go to that field from which they issued, to study them. I waited in it and twice I heard the great thunderclaps myself. I thought they came from near the field's center, and I studied that place. But I could see nothing there that was causing them. I dug in the ground, I looked up for hours into the sky, but there was nothing. And still, at intervals, the thunderclaps sounded.

"I still kept going to the field, though I knew that many of my neighbors whispered that I was engaged in sorcery. Upon that morning of the third day of June, it had occurred to me to take certain instruments, such as loadstones, to the field, to see whether anything might be learned with them. I went, a few superstitious ones following me at a distance. I reached the field's center, and started the examinations I had planned. Then came suddenly another thunderclap and with it I passed from the sight of those who had followed and were watching, vanished from view.

"Sire, I cannot well describe what happened in that moment. I heard the thunderclap come as though from all the air around me, stunning my ears with its terrible burst of sound. And at the same moment that I heard it, I was buffeted as though by awful winds and seemed falling downward through terrific depths. Then through the hellish uproar, I felt myself bumping upon a hard surface, and the sounds quickly ceased from about me.

"I had involuntarily closed my eyes at the great thunderclap, but now, slowly, I opened them. I looked around me, first in stupefaction, and then in growing amazement. For I was not in that familiar field at all, sire, that I had been in a moment before. I was in a room, lying upon its floor, and it was such a room as I had never seen before.

"Its walls were smooth and white and gleaming. There were windows in the walls, and they were closed with sheets of glass so smooth and clear that one seemed looking through a clear opening rather than through glass. The floor was of stone, smooth and seamless as though carven from one great rock, yet seeming not, in some way, to be stone at all. There was a great circle of smooth metal inset in it, and it was on it that I was lying.

"All around the room were many great things the like of which I had never seen. Some seemed of black metal, seemed contrivances or machines of some sort. Black cords of wire connected them to each other and from part of them came a humming sound that did not stop. Others had glass tubes fixed on the front of them, and there were square black plates on which were many shining little handles and buttons.

"There was a sound of voices, and I turned to find that two men were bending over me. They were men like myself, yet they were at the same time like no men I had ever met! One was white-bearded and the other plump and bare of face. Neither of them wore cloak or tunic or hose. Instead they wore loose and straight-hanging garments of cloth.

"They were both greatly excited, it seemed, and were talking to each other as they bent over me. I caught a word or two of their speech in a moment, and found it was French they were talking. But it was not the French I knew, being so strange and with so many new words as to be almost a different language. I could understand the drift, though, of what they were saying.

"'We have succeeded!' the plump one was shouting excitedly. 'We've brought someone through at last!'

"'They will never believe it,' the other replied. 'They'll say it was faked.'

"'Nonsense!' cried the first. 'We can do it again, Rastin; we can show them before their own eyes!'

"'They bent toward me, seeing me staring at them.

"'Where are you from?' shouted the plump-faced one. 'What time--what year--what century?'"
"He doesn't understand, Thicourt," muttered the white-bearded one. 'What year is this now, my friend?' he asked me.

'I found voice to answer. 'Surely, sirs, whoever you be, you know that this is the year fourteen hundred and forty-four,' I said.

'That set them off again into a babble of excited talk, of which I could make out only a word here and there. They lifted me up, seeing how sick and weak I felt, and seated me in a strange, but very comfortable chair. I felt dazed. The two were still talking excitedly, but finally the white-bearded one, Rastin, turned to me. He spoke to me, very slowly, so that I understood him clearly, and he asked me my name. I told him.

"Henri Lothiere," he repeated. 'Well, Henri, you must try to understand. You are not now in the year 1444. You are five hundred years in the future, or what would seem to you the future. This is the year 1944.'

"And Rastin and I have jerked you out of your own time across five solid centuries,' said the other, grinning.

'I looked from one to the other. 'Messieurs,' I pleaded, and Rastin shook his head.

"He does not believe,' he said to the other. Then to me, 'Where were you just before you found yourself here, Henri?' he asked.

"In a field at the outskirts of Paris,' I said.

"Well, look from that window and see if you still believe yourself in your 15th-century Paris.'

I went to the window. I looked out. Mother of God, what a sight before my eyes! The familiar gray little houses, the open fields behind them, the saunterers in the dirt streets—all these were gone and it was a new and terrible city that lay about me! Its broad streets were of stone and great buildings of many levels rose on either side of them. Great numbers of people, dressed like the two beside me, moved in the streets and also strange vehicles or carriages, undrawn by horse or ox, that rushed to and fro at undreamed-of speed! I staggered back to the chair.

"You believe now, Henri?" asked the whitebeard, Rastin, kindly enough, and I nodded weakly. My brain was whirling.

'He pointed to the circle of metal on the floor and the machines around the room. 'Those are what we used to jerk you from your own time to this one,' he said.

"But how, sirs?" I asked. 'For the love of God, how is it that you can take me from one time to another? Have ye become gods or devils?"

"Neither the one nor the other, Henri,' he answered. 'We are simply scientists, physicists—men who want to know as much as man can know and who spend our lives in seeking knowledge.'

'I felt my confidence returning. These were men such as I had dreamed might some day be. 'But what can you do with time?' I asked. 'Is not time a thing unalterable, unchanging?'

'Both shook their heads. 'No, Henri, it is not. But lately have our men of science found that out.'

'They went on to tell me of things that I could not understand. It seemed they were telling that their men of knowledge had found time to be a mere measurement, or dimension, just as length or breadth or thickness. They mentioned names with reverence that I had never heard—Einstein and De Sitter and Lorentz. I was in a maze at their words.

'They said that just as men use force to move or rotate matter from one point along the three known measurements to another, so might matter be rotated from one point in time, the fourth measurement, to another, if the right force were used. They said that their machines produced that force and applied it to the metal circle from five hundred years before to this time of theirs.

'They had tried it many times, they said, but nothing had been on the spot at that time and they had rotated nothing but the air above it from the one time to the other, and the reverse. I told them of the thunderclaps that had been heard at the spot in the field and that had made me curious. They said that they had been caused by the changing of the air above the spot from the one time to the other in their trials. I could not understand these things.

'They said then that I had happened to be on the spot when they had again turned on their force and so had been rotated out of my own time into theirs. They said that they had always hoped to get someone living from a distant time in that way, since such a man would be a proof to all the other men of knowledge of what they had been able to do.

'I could not comprehend, and they saw and told me not to fear. I was not fearful, but excited at the things that I saw around me. I asked of those things and Rastin and Thicourt laughed and explained some of them to me as best they could. Much they said that I did not understand but my eyes saw marvels in that room of which I had never dreamed.

'They showed me a thing like a small glass bottle with wires inside, and then told me to touch a button beneath it. I did so and the bottle shone with a brilliant light exceeding that of scores of candles. I shrank back, but they laughed, and when Rastin touched the button again, the light in the glass thing vanished. I saw that there were many
of these things in the ceiling.

"They showed me also a rounded black object of metal with a wheel at the end. A belt ran around the wheel and around smaller wheels connected to many machines. They touched a lever on this object and a sound of humming came from it and the wheel turned very fast, turning all the machines with the belt. It turned faster than any man could ever have turned it, yet when they touched the lever again, its turning ceased. They said that it was the power of the lightning in the skies that they used to make the light and to turn that wheel!

"My brain reeled at the wonders that they showed. One took an instrument from the table that he held to his face, saying that he would summon the other scientists or men of knowledge to see their experiment that night. He spoke into the instrument as though to different men, and let me hear voices from it answering him! They said that the men who answered were leagues separated from him!

"I could not believe--and yet somehow I did believe! I was half-dazed with wonder and yet excited too. The white-bearded man, Rastin, saw that, and encouraged me. Then they brought a small box with an opening and placed a black disk on the box, and set it turning in some way. A woman's voice came from the opening of the box, singing. I shuddered when they told me that the women was one who had died years before. Could the dead speak thus?

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"How can I describe what I saw there? Another box or cabinet there was, with an opening also. I thought it was like that from which I had heard the dead woman singing, but they said it was different. They touched buttons on it and a voice came from it speaking in a tongue I knew not. They said that the man was speaking thousands of leagues from us, in a strange land across the uncrossed western ocean, yet he seemed speaking by my side!

"They saw how dazed I was by these things, and gave me wine. At that I took heart, for wine, at least, was as it had always been.

"'You will want to see Paris--the Paris of our time, Henri?' asked Rastin.

"'But it is different--terrible--' I said.

"'We'll take you,' Thicourt said, 'but first your clothes--'

"He got a long light coat that they had me put on, that covered my tunic and hose, and a hat of grotesque round shape that they put on my head. They led me then out of the building and into the street.

"I gazed astoundedly along that street. It had a raised walk at either side, on which many hundreds of people moved to and fro, all dressed in as strange a fashion. Many, like Rastin and Thicourt, seemed of gentle blood, yet, in spite of this, they did not wear a sword or even a dagger. There were no knights or squires, or priests or peasants. All seemed dressed much the same.

"Small lads ran to and fro selling what seemed sheets of very thin white parchment, many times folded and covered with lettering. Rastin said that these had written in them all things that had happened through all the world, even but hours before. I said that to write even one of these sheets would take a clerk many days, but they said that the writing was done in some way very quickly by machines.

"In the broad stone street between the two raised walks were rushing back and forth the strange vehicles I had seen from the window. There was no animal pulling or pushing any one of them, yet they never halted their swift rush, and carried many people at unthinkable speed. Sometimes those who walked stepped before the rushing vehicles, and then from them came terrible warning snarls or moans that made the walkers draw back.

"One of the vehicles stood at the walk's edge before us, and we entered it and sat side by side on a soft leather seat. Thicourt sat behind a wheel on a post, with levers beside him. He touched these and a humming sound came from somewhere in the vehicle and then it too began to rush forward. Faster and faster along the street it went, yet neither of them seemed afraid.

"Many thousands of these vehicles were moving swiftly through the streets about us. We passed on, between great buildings and along wider streets, my eyes and ears numbed by what I saw about me. Then the buildings grew smaller, after we had gone for miles through them, and we were passing through the city's outskirts. I could not believe, hardly, that it was Paris in which I was.

"We came to a great flat and open field outside the city and there Thicourt stopped and we got out of the vehicle. There were big buildings at the field's end, and I saw other vehicles rolling out of them across the field, ones different from any I had yet seen, with flat winglike projections on either side. They rolled out over the field very fast and then I cried out as I saw them rising from the ground into the air. Mother of God, they were flying! The men in them were flying!

"Rastin and Thicourt took me forward to the great buildings. They spoke to men there and one brought forward one of the winged cars. Rastin told me to get in, and though I was terribly afraid, there was too terrible a fascination that drew me in. Thicourt and Rastin entered after me, and we sat in seats with the other man. He had before him levers and buttons, while at the car's front was a great thing like a double-oar or paddle. A loud roaring came and
that double-blade began to whirl so swiftly that I could not see it. Then the car rolled swiftly forward, bumping on
the ground, and then ceased to bump. I looked down, then shuddered. The ground was already far beneath! I too,
was flying in the air!

"We swept upward at terrible speed that increased steadily. The thunder of the car was terrific, and, as the man
at the levers changed their position, we curved around and over downward and upward as though birds. Rastin tried
to explain to me how the car flew, but it was all too wonderful, and I could not understand. I only knew that a wild
thrilling excitement held me, and that it were worth life and death to fly thus, if but for once, as I had always
dreamed that men might some day do.

"Higher and higher we went. The earth lay far beneath and I saw now that Paris was indeed a mighty city, its
vast mass of buildings stretching away almost to the horizons below us. A mighty city of the future that it had been
given my eyes to look on!

"There were other winged cars darting to and fro in the air about us, and they said that many of these were
starting or finishing journeys of hundreds of leagues in the air. Then I cried out as I saw a great shape coming nearer
us in the air. It was many rods in length, tapering to a point at both ends, a vast ship sailing in the air! There were
great cabins on its lower part and in them we glimpsed people gazing out, coming and going inside, dancing even!
They told me that vast ships of the air like this sailed to and fro for thousands of leagues with hundreds inside them.

"The huge vessel of the air passed us and then our winged car began to descend. It circled smoothly down to
the field like a swooping bird, and, when we landed there, Rastin and Thicourt led me back to the ground-vehicle. It
was late afternoon by then, the sun sinking westward, and darkness had descended by the time we rolled back into
the great city.

"But in that city was not darkness! Lights were everywhere in it, flashing brilliant lights that shone from its
mighty buildings and that blinked and burned and ran like water in great symbols upon the buildings above the
streets. Their glare was like that of day! We stopped before a great building into which Rastin and Thicourt led me.

"It was vast inside and in it were many people in rows on rows of seats. I thought it a cathedral at first but saw
soon that it was not. The wall at one end of it, toward which all in it were gazing, had on it pictures of people, great
in size, and those pictures were moving as though themselves alive! And they were talking one to another, too, as
though with living voices! I trembled. What magic!

"With Rastin and Thicourt in seats beside me, I watched the pictures enthralled. It was like looking through a
great window into strange worlds. I saw the sea, seemingly tossing and roaring there before me, and then saw on it a
ship, a vast ship of size incredible, without sails or oars, holding thousands of people. I seemed on that ship as I
watched, seemed moving forward with it. They told me it was sailing over the western ocean that never men had
crossed. I feared!

"Then another scene, land appearing from the ship. A great statue, upholding a torch, and we on the ship
seemed passing beneath it. They said that the ship was approaching a city, the city of New York, but mists hid all
before us. Then suddenly the mists before the ship cleared and there before me seemed the city.

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"Mother of God, what a city! Climbing range on range of great mountain-like buildings that aspired up as
though to scale heaven itself! Far beneath narrow streets pierced through them and in the picture we seemed to land
from the ship, to go through those streets of the city. It was an incredible city of madness! The streets and ways were
mere chasms between the sky-toppling buildings! People--people--people--millions on millions of them rushed
through the endless streets. Countless ground-vehicles rushed to and fro also, and other different ones that soared
above the streets and still others below them!

"Winged flying-cars and great airships were sailing to and fro over the titanic city, and in the waters around it
great ships of the sea and smaller ships were coming as man never dreamed of surely, that reached out from the
mighty city on all sides. And with the coming of darkness, the city blazed with living light!

"The pictures changed, showed other mighty cities, though none so terrible as that one. It showed great
mechanisms that appalled me. Giant metal things that scooped in an instant from the earth as much as a man might
dig in days. Vast things that poured molten metal from them like water. Others that lifted loads that hundreds of men
and oxen could not have stirred.

"They showed men of knowledge like Rastin and Thicourt beside me. Some were healers, working miraculous
cures in a way that I could not understand. Others were gazing through giant tubes at the stars, and the pictures
showed what they saw, showed that all of the stars were great suns like our sun, and that our sun was greater than
earth, that earth moved around it instead of the reverse! How could such things be, I wondered. Yet they said that it
was so, that earth was round like an apple, and that with other earths like it, the planets, moved round the sun. I
heard, but could scarce understand.

"At last Rastin and Thicourt led me out of that place of living pictures and to their ground-vehicle. We went
again through the streets to their building, where first I had found myself. As we went I saw that none challenged my right to go, nor asked who was my lord. And Rastin said that none now had lords, but that all were lord, king and priest and noble, having no more power than any in the land. Each man was his own master! It was what I had hardly dared to hope for, in my own time, and this, I thought, was greatest of all the marvels they had shown me!

"We entered again their building but Rastin and Thicourt took me first to another room than the one in which I had found myself. They said that their men of knowledge were gathered there to hear of their feat, and to have it proved to them.

"'You would not be afraid to return to your own time, Henri?' asked Rastin, and I shook my head.

"'I want to return to it,' I told them. 'I want to tell my people there what I have seen--what the future is that they must strive for.'

"'But if they should not believe you?' Thicourt asked.

"'Still I must go--must tell them,' I said.

"Rastin grasped my hand. 'You are a man, Henri,' he said. Then, throwing aside the cloak and hat I had worn outside, they went with me down to the big white-walled room where first I had found myself.

"It was lit brightly now by many of the shining glass things on ceiling and walls, and in it were many men. They all stared strangely at me and at my clothes, and talked excitedly so fast that I could not understand. Rastin began to address them.

"He seemed explaining how he had brought me from my own time to his. He used many terms and words that I could not understand, incomprehensible references and phrases, and I could understand but little. I heard again the names of Einstein and De Sitter that I had heard before, repeated frequently by these men as they disputed with Rastin and Thicourt. They seemed disputing about me.

"One big man was saying, 'Impossible! I tell you, Rastin, you have faked this fellow!'

"Rastin smiled. 'You don't believe that Thicourt and I brought him here from his own time across five centuries?'

"A chorus of excited negatives answered him. He had me stand up and speak to them. They asked me many questions, part of which I could not understand. I told them of my life, and of the city of my own time, and of king and priest and noble, and of many simple things that they seemed quite ignorant of. Some appeared to believe me but others did not, and again their dispute broke out.

"'There is a way to settle the argument, gentlemen,' said Rastin finally.

"'How?' all cried.

"'Thicourt and I brought Henri across five centuries by rotating the time-dimensions at this spot,' he said.

"'Suppose we reverse that rotation and send him back before your eyes--would that be proof?'

"'They all said that it would. Rastin turned to me. 'Stand on the metal circle, Henri,' he said. I did so.

"All were watching very closely. Thicourt did something quickly with the levers and buttons of the mechanisms in the room. They began to hum, and blue light came from the glass tubes on some. All were quiet, watching me as I stood there on the circle of metal. I met Rastin's eyes and something in me made me call goodbye to him. He waved his hand and smiled. Thicourt pressed more buttons and the hum of the mechanisms grew louder. Then he reached toward another lever. All in the room were tense and I was tense.

"'Then I saw Thicourt's arm move as he turned one of the many levers.

"A terrific clap of thunder seemed to break around me, and as I closed my eyes before its shock, I felt myself whirling around and falling at the same time as though into a maelstrom, just as I had done before. The awful falling sensation ceased in a moment and the sound subsided. I opened my eyes. I was on the ground at the center of the familiar field from which I had vanished hours before, upon the morning of that day. It was night now, though, for that day I had spent five hundred years in the future.

"There were many people gathered around the field, fearful, and they screamed and some fled when I appeared in the thunderclap. I went toward those who remained. My mind was full of things I had seen and I wanted to tell them of these things. I wanted to tell them how they must work ever toward that future time of wonder.

"But they did not listen. Before I had spoken minutes to them they cried out on me as a sorcerer and a blasphemer, and seized me and brought me here to the Inquisitor, to you, sire. And to you, sire, I have told the truth in all things. I know that in doing so I have set the seal of my own fate, and that only a sorcerer would ever tell such a tale, yet despite that I am glad. Glad that I have told one at least of this time of what I saw five centuries in the future. Glad that I saw! Glad that I saw the things that someday, sometime, must come to be--"  

* * * * *

It was a week later that they burned Henri Lothiere. Jean de Marselait, lifting his gaze from his endless parchment accusation and examens on that afternoon, looked out through the window at a thick curl of black smoke going up from the distant square.
"Strange, that one," he mused. "A sorcerer, of course, but such a one as I had never heard before. I wonder," he half-whispered, "was there any truth in that wild tale of his? The future--who can say--what men might do--?"

There was silence in the room as he brooded for a moment, and then he shook himself as one ridding himself of absurd speculations. "But tush--enough of these crazy fancies. They will have me for a sorcerer if I yield to these wild fancies and visions of the future."

And bending again with his pen to the parchment before him, he went gravely on with his work.

THE END
"As soon as I'm well we'll go to Mars for a vacation again," Alice would say. But now she was dead, and the surgeons said she was not even human. In his misery, Hastings knew two things: he loved his wife; but they had never been off Earth!

A reporter should be objective even about a hospital. It's his business to stir others' emotions and not let his own be stirred. But that was no good, Mel Hastings told himself. No good at all when it was Alice who was here somewhere, balanced uncertainly between life and death.

Alice had been in Surgery far too long. Something had gone wrong. He was sure of it. He glanced at his watch. It would soon be dawn outside. To Mel Hastings this marked a significant and irrevocable passage of time. If Alice were to emerge safe and whole from the white cavern of Surgery she would have done so now.

Mel sank deeper in the heavy chair, feeling a quietness within himself as if the slow creep of death were touching him also. There was a sudden far distant roar and through the window he saw a streak of brightness in the sky. That would be the tourist ship, the Martian Princess, he remembered.

That was the last thing Alice had said before they took her away from him. "As soon as I'm well again we'll go to Mars for a vacation again, and then you'll remember. It's so beautiful there. We had so much fun--"

Funny, wonderful little Alice--and her strange delusion that she still clung to, that they had taken a Martian vacation in the first year of their marriage. It had started about a year ago, and nothing he could say would shake it. Neither of them had ever been to space.

He wished now he had taken her. It would have been worth it, no matter what its personal cost. He had never told her about the phobia that had plagued him all his life, the fear of outer space that made him break out in a cold sweat just to think of it--nor of the nightmare that came again and again, ever since he was a little boy.

There must have been some way to lick this thing--to give her that vacation on Mars that she had wanted so much.

Now it was too late. He knew it was too late.

The white doors opened, and Dr. Winters emerged slowly. He looked at Mel Hastings a long time as if trying to remember who the reporter was. "I must see you--in my office," he said finally.

Mel stared back in numb recognition. "She's dead," he said.

Dr. Winters nodded slowly as if in surprise and wonder that Mel had divined this fact. "I must see you in my office," he repeated.

Mel watched his retreating figure. There seemed no point in following. Dr. Winters had said all that need be said. Far down the corridor the Doctor turned and stood patiently as if understanding why Mel had not followed, but determined to wait until he did. The reporter stirred and rose from the chair, his legs withering beneath him. The figure of Dr. Winters grew larger as he approached. The morning clatter of the hospital seemed an ear-torturing shrillness. The door of the office closed and shut it out.

"She is dead." Dr. Winters sat behind the desk and folded and unfolded his hands. He did not look at Mel. "We did everything we could, Mr. Hastings. Her injuries from the accident were comparatively minor--" He hesitated, then went on. "In normal circumstances there would have been no question--her injuries could have been repaired."

"What do you mean, 'in normal circumstances--'?

Dr. Winters turned his face away from Mel for a moment as if to avoid some pain beyond endurance. He stared across his forehead and eyes and held it there a moment before speaking. Then he faced Mel again. "The woman you brought in here last night--your wife--is completely un-normal in her internal structure. Her internal organs cannot even be identified. She is like a being of some other species. She is not--she is simply not human, Mr. Hastings."

Mel stared at him, trying to grasp the meaning of the words. Meaning would not come. He uttered a short, hysterical laugh that was like a bark. "You're crazy, Doc. You've completely flipped your lid!"

Dr. Winters nodded. "For hours during the night I was in agreement with that opinion. When I first observed your wife's condition I was convinced I was utterly insane. I called in six other men to verify my observation. All of them were as stupefied as I by what we saw. Organs that had no place in a human structure. Evidence of a chemistry that existed in no living being we had ever seen before--"

The Doctor's words rolled over him like a roaring surf, burying, smothering, destroying--
"I want to see." Mel's voice was like a hollow cough from far away. "I think you're crazy. I think you're hiding some mistake you made yourself. You killed Alice in a simple little operation, and now you're trying to get out of it with some crazy story that nobody on earth would ever believe!"

"I want you to see," said Dr. Winters, rising slowly. "That's why I called you in here, Mr. Hastings."

* * * * *

Mel trailed him down the long corridor again. No words were spoken between them. Mel felt as if nothing were real anymore.

They went through the white doors of Surgery and through the inner doors. Then they entered a white, silent--cold--room beyond.

In the glare of icy white lights a single sheeted figure rested on a table. Mel suddenly didn't want to see. But Dr. Winters was drawing back the cover. He exposed the face, the beloved features of Alice Hastings. Mel cried out her name and moved toward the table. There was nothing in her face to suggest she was not simply sleeping, her hair disarrayed, her face composed and relaxed as he had seen her hundreds of times.

"Can you stand to witness this?" asked Dr. Winters anxiously. "Shall I get you a sedative?"

Mel shook his head numbly. "No--show me ..."

The great, fresh wound extended diagonally across the abdomen and branched up beneath the heart. The Doctor grasped a pair of small scissors and swiftly clipped the temporary sutures. With forceps and retractors he spread open the massive incision.

Mel closed his eyes against the sickness that seized him.

"Gangrene!" he said. "She's full of gangrene!"

Below the skin, the surface layers of fatty tissue, the substance of the tissue changed from the dark red of the wounded tissue to a dark and greenish hue that spoke of deadly decay.

But Dr. Winters was shaking his head. "No. It's not gangrene. That's the way we found the tissue. That appears to be its--normal condition, if you will."

Mel stared without believing, without comprehending.

Dr. Winters probed the wound open further. "We should see the stomach here," he said. "What is here where the stomach should be I cannot tell you. There is no name for this organ. The intestinal tract should lie here. Instead, there is only this homogeneous mass of greenish, gelatinous material. Other organs, hardly differentiated from this mass, appear where the liver, the pancreas, the spleen should be."

Mel was hearing his voice as if from some far distance or in a dream.

"There are lungs--of a sort," the Doctor went on. "She was certainly capable of breathing. And there's a greatly modified circulatory system, two of them, it appears. One circulates a blood substance in the outer layers of tissue that is almost normal. The other circulates a liquid that gives the remainder of the organs their greenish hue. But how circulation takes place we do not know. She has no heart."

* * * * *

Mel Hastings burst out in hysterical laughter. "Now I know you're crazy Doc! My tender, loving Alice with no heart! She used to tell me, 'I haven't got any brains. I wouldn't have married a dumb reporter if I did. But so I've got a heart and that's what fell in love with you--my heart, not my brains.' She loved me, can't you understand that?"

Dr. Winters was slowly drawing him away. "I understand. Of course I understand. Come with me now, Mr. Hastings, and lie down for a little while. I'll get you something to help take away the shock."

Mel permitted himself to be led away to a small room nearby. He drank the liquid the Doctor brought, but he refused to lie down.

"You've shown me," he said with dull finality. "But I don't care what the explanation is. I knew Alice. She was human all right, more so than either you or I. She was completely normal, I tell you--all except for this idea she had the last year or so that we'd gone together on a vacation to Mars at one time."

"That wasn't true?"

"No. Neither of us had ever been out in space."

"How well did you know your wife before you married her?"

Mel smiled in faint reminiscence. "We grew up together, went to the same grade school and high school. It seems like there was never a time when Alice and I didn't know each other. Our folks lived next door for years."

"Was she a member of a large family?"

"She had an older brother and sister and two younger sisters."

"What were her parents like?"

"They're still living. Her father runs an implement store. It's a farm community where they live. Wonderful people. Alice was just like them."

Dr. Winters was silent before he went on. "I have subjected you to this mental torture for just one reason, Mr.
Hastings. If it has been a matter of any less importance I would not have told you the details of your wife's condition, much less asking you to look at her. But this is such an enormous scientific mystery that I must ask your cooperation in helping to solve it. I want your permission to preserve and dissect the body of your wife for the cause of science."

Mel looked at the Doctor in sudden sharp antagonism. "Not even give her a burial? Let her be put away in bottles, like--like a--"

"Please don't upset yourself any more than necessary. But I do beg that you consider what I've just proposed. Surely a moment's reflection will show you that this is no more barbaric than our other customs regarding our dead.

"But even this is beside the point. The girl, Alice, whom you married is like a normal human being in every apparent external respect, yet the organs which gave her life and enabled her to function are like nothing encountered before in human experience. It is imperative that we understand the meaning of this. It is yours to say whether or not we shall have this opportunity."

Mel started to speak again, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Time is critical," said Dr. Winters, "but I don't want to force you to an instantaneous answer. Take thirty minutes to think about it. Within that time, additional means of preservation must be taken. I regret that I must be in such haste, but I urge that your answer be yes."

Dr. Winters moved towards the door, but Mel gestured for him to remain.

"I want to see her again," Mel said.

"There is no need. You have been tortured enough. Remember your wife as you have known her all her life, not as you saw her a moment ago."

"If you want my answer let me see her again."

* * * * *

Dr. Winters led the way silently back to the cold room. Mel drew down the cover only far enough to expose the face of Alice. There was no mistake. Somehow he had been hoping that all this would turn out to be some monstrous error. But there was no error.

Would she want me to do what the Doctor has asked? he thought. She wouldn't care. She would probably think it a very huge joke that she had been born with innards that made her different from everybody else. She would be amused by the profound probings and mutterings of the learned doctors trying to find an explanation for something that had no explanation.

Mel drew the sheet tenderly over her face.

"You can do as you wish," he said to Dr. Winters. "It makes no difference to us--to either of us."

* * * * *

The sedative Dr. Winters had given him, plus his own exhaustion, drove Mel to sleep for a few hours during the afternoon, but by evening he was awake again and knew that a night of sleeplessness lay ahead of him. He couldn't stand to spend it in the house, with all its fresh reminders of Alice.

He walked out into the street as it began to get dark. Walking was easy; almost no one did it any more. The rush of private and commercial cars swarmed overhead and rumbled in the ground beneath. He was an isolated anachronism walking silently at the edge of the great city.

He was sick of it. He would have liked to have turned his back on the city and left it forever. Alice had felt the same. But there was nowhere to go. News reporting was the only thing he knew, and news occurred only in the great, ugly cities of the world. The farmlands, such as he and Alice had known when they were young, produced nothing of interest to the satiated denizens of the towns and cities. Nothing except food, and much of this was now being produced by great factories that synthesized protein and carbohydrates. When fats could be synthesized the day of the farmer would be over.

He wondered if there weren't some way out of it now. With Alice gone there was only himself, and his needs were few. He didn't know, but suddenly he wanted very much to see it all again. And, besides, he had to tell her folks.

* * * * *

The ancient surface bus reached Central Valley at noon the next day. It all looked very much as it had the last time Mel had seen it and it looked very good indeed. The vast, open lands; the immense ripe fields.

The bus passed the high school where Mel and Alice had attended classes together. He half expected to see her running across the campus lawn to meet him. In the middle of town he got off the bus and there were Alice's mother and father.

They were dry-eyed now but white and numb with shock. George Dalby took his hand and pumped it heavily. "We can't realize it, Mel. We just can't believe Alice is gone."

His wife put her arms around Mel and struggled with her tears again. "You didn't say anything about the
funeral. When will it be?"

Mel swallowed hard, fighting the one lie he had to tell. He almost wondered now why he had agreed to Dr. Winters' request. "Alice--always wanted to do all the good she could in the world," he said. "She figured that she could be of some use even after she was gone. So she made an agreement with the research hospital that they could have her body after she died."

It took a moment for her mother to grasp the meaning. Then she cried out, "We can't even bury her?"

"We should have a memorial service, right here at home where all her friends are," said Mel.

George Dalby nodded in his grief. "That was just like Alice," he said. "Always wanting to do something for somebody else--"

And it was true, Mel thought. If Alice had supposed she was not going to live any longer she would probably have thought of the idea, herself. Her parents were easily reconciled.

They took him out to the old familiar house and gave him the room where he and Alice had spent the first days of their marriage.

* * * * *

When it was night and the lights were out he felt able to sleep naturally for the first time since Alice's accident. She seemed not far away here in this old familiar house.

In memory, she was not, for Mel was convinced he could remember the details of his every association with her. He first became conscious of her existence one day when they were in the third grade. At the beginning of each school year the younger pupils went through a course of weighing, inspection, knee tapping, and cavity counting. Mel had come in late for his examination that year and barged into the wrong room. A shower of little-girl squeals had greeted him as the teacher told him kindly where the boy's examination room was.

But he remembered most vividly Alice Dalby standing in the middle of the room, her blouse off but held protectingly in front of her as she jumped up and down in rage and pointed a finger at him. "You get out of here, Melvin Hastings! You're not a nice boy at all!"

Face red, he had hastily retreated as the teacher assured Alice and the rest of the girls that he had made a simple mistake. But how angry Alice had been! It was a week before she would speak to him.

He smiled and sank back deeply into the pillow. He remembered how proud he had been when old Doc Collins, who came out to do the honors every Fall, had told him there wasn't a thing wrong with him and that if he continued to drink his milk regularly he'd grow up to be a football player. He could still hear Doc's words whistling through his teeth and feel the coldness of the stethoscope on his chest.

Suddenly, he sat upright in bed in the darkness.

Stethoscope!

They had tapped and inspected and listened to Alice that day, and all the other examination days.

If Doc Collins had been unable to find a heartbeat in her he'd have fainted--and spread the news all over town!

Mel got up and stood at the window, his heart pounding. Old Doc Collins was gone, but the medical records of those school examinations might still be around somewhere. He didn't know what he expected to prove, but surely those records would not tell the same story Dr. Winters had told.

It took him nearly all the next day. The grade school principal agreed to help him check through the dusty attic of the school, where ancient records and papers were tumbled about and burst from their cardboard boxes.

Then Paul Ames, the school board secretary, took Mel down to the District Office and offered to help look for the records. The old building was stifling hot and dusty with summer disuse. But down in the cool, cobwebbed basement they found it.... Alice's records from the third grade on up through the ninth. On every one: heart, o.k.; lungs, normal. Pulse and blood pressure readings were on each chart.

"I'd like to take these," said Mel. "Her doctor in town--he wants to write some kind of paper on her case and would like all the past medical history he can get."

Paul Ames frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not allowed to give District property away. But they should have been thrown out a long time ago--take 'em and don't tell anybody I let you have 'em."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Mel said.

And when she was fourteen or fifteen her appendix had been removed. A Dr. Brown had performed the operation, Mel remembered. He had taken over from Collins.

"Sure, he's still here," Paul Ames said. "Same office old Doc Collins used. You'll probably find him there right now."

Dr. Brown remembered. He didn't remember the details of the appendectomy, but he still had records that showed a completely normal operation.

"I wonder if I could get a copy of that record and have you sign it," Mel said. He explained about the interest of Dr. Winters in her case without revealing the actual circumstances.
"Glad to," said Dr. Brown. "I just wish things hadn't turned out the way they have. One of the loveliest girls that ever grew up here, Alice."

* * *

The special memorial service was held in the old community church on Sunday afternoon. It was like the drawing of a curtain across a portion of Mel's life, and he knew that curtain would never open again.

He took a bus leaving town soon after the service.

There was one final bit of evidence, and he wondered all the way back to town why he had not thought of it first. Alice's pregnancy had ended in miscarriage, and there had never been another.

But X-rays had been taken to try to find the cause of Alice's difficulty. If they showed that Alice was normal within the past two years--

* * * * *

Dr. Winters was mildly surprised to see Mel again. He invited the reporter in to his office and offered him a chair. "I suppose you have come to inquire about our findings regarding your wife."

"Yes--if you've found anything," said Mel. "I've got a couple of things to show you."

"We've found little more than we knew the night of her death. We have completed the dissection of the body. A minute analysis of each organ is now under way, and chemical tests of the body's substances are being made. We found that differences in the skeletal structure were almost as great as those in the fleshy tissues. We find no relationship between these structures and those of any other species--human or animal--that we have ever found."

"And yet Alice was not always like that," said Mel.

Dr. Winters looked at him sharply. "How do you know that?"

Mel extended the medical records he had obtained in Central Valley. Dr. Winters picked them up and examined them for a long time while Mel watched silently.

Finally, Dr. Winters put the records down with a sigh. "This seems to make the problem even more complex than it was."

"There are X-rays, too," said Mel. "Alice had pelvic X-rays only a little over two years ago. I tried to get them, but the doctor said you'd have to request them. They should be absolute proof that Alice was different then."

"Tell me who has them and I'll send for them at once."

An hour later Dr. Winters shook his head in disbelief as he turned off the light box and removed the X-ray photograph. "It's impossible to believe that these were taken of your wife, but they corroborate the evidence of the other medical records. They show a perfectly normal structure."

The two men remained silent across the desk, each reluctant to express his confused thoughts. Dr. Winters finally broke the silence. "It must be, Mr. Hastings," he said, "--it must be that this woman--this utterly alien person--is simply not your wife, Alice. Somehow, somewhere, there must be a mistake in identity, a substitution of similar individuals."

"She was not out of my sight," said Mel. "Everything was completely normal when I came home that night. Nothing was out of place. We went out to a show. Then, on the way home, the accident occurred. There could have been no substitution--except right here in the hospital. But I know it was Alice I saw. That's why I made you let me see her again--to make sure."

"But the evidence you have brought me proves otherwise. These medical records, these X-rays prove that the girl, Alice, whom you married, was quite normal. It is utterly impossible that she could have metamorphosed into the person on whom we operated."

Mel stared at the reflection of the sky in the polished desk top. "I don't know the answer," he said. "It must not be Alice. But if that's the case, where is Alice?"

"That might even be a matter for the police," said Dr. Winters. "There are many things yet to be learned about this mystery."

"There's one thing more," said Mel. "Fingerprints. When we first came here Alice got a job where she had to have her fingerprints taken."

"Excellent!" Dr. Winters exclaimed. "That should give us our final proof!"

It took the rest of the afternoon to get the fingerprint record and make a comparison. Dr. Winters called Mel at home to give him the report. There was no question. The fingerprints were identical. The corpse was that of Alice Hastings.

* * * * *

The nightmare came again that night. Worse than Mel could ever remember it. As always, it was a dream of space, black empty space, and he was floating alone in the immense depths of it. There was no direction. He was caught in a whirlpool of vertigo from which he reached out with agonized yearning for some solidarity to cling to.

There was only space.
After a time he was no longer alone. He could not see them, but he knew they were out there. The searchers. He did not know why he had to flee or why they sought him, but he knew they must never overtake him, or all would be lost.

Somehow he found a way to propel himself through empty space. The searchers were growing points of light in the far distance. They gave him a sense of direction. His being, his existence, his universe of meaning and understanding depended on the success of his flight from the searchers. Faster, through the wild black depths of space--

He never knew whether he escaped or not. Always he awoke in a tangle of bedclothes, bathed in sweat, whimpering in fear. For a long time Alice had been there to touch his hand when he awoke. But Alice was gone now and he was so weary of the night pursuit. Sometimes he wished it would end with the searchers--whoever they were--catching up with him and doing what they intended to do. Then maybe there would be no more nightmare. Maybe there would be no more Mel Hastings, he thought. And that wouldn't be so bad, either.

He tossed sleeplessly the rest of the night and got up at dawn feeling as if he had not been to bed at all. He would take one day more, and then get back to the News Bureau. He'd take this day to do what couldn't be put off any longer--the collecting and disposition of Alice's personal belongings.

* * * * *

He shaved, bathed and dressed, then began emptying the drawers, one by one. There were many souvenirs, mementos. She was always collecting these. Her bottom drawer was full of stuff that he'd glimpsed only occasionally.

In the second layer of junk in the drawer he came across the brochure on Martian vacations. It must have been one of the dreams of her life, he thought. She'd wanted it so much that she'd almost come to believe that it was real. He turned the pages of the smooth, glossy brochure. Its cover bore the picture of the great Martian Princess and the blazoned emblem of Connemorra Space Lines. Inside were glistening photos of the plush interior of the great vacation liner, and pictures of the domed cities of Mars where Earthmen played more than they worked. Mars had become the great resort center of Earth.

Mel closed the book and glanced again at the Connemorra name. Only one man had ever amassed the resources necessary to operate a private space line. Jim Connemorra had done it; no one knew quite how. But he operated now out of both hemispheres with a space line that ignored freight and dealt only in passenger business. He made money, on a scale that no government-operated line had yet been able to approach.

Mel sank down to the floor, continuing to shift through the other things in the drawer.

His hand stopped. He remained motionless as recognition showered sudden frantic questions in his mind. There lay a ticket envelope marked Connemorra Lines.

The envelope was empty when he looked inside, and there was no name on it. But it was worn. As if it might have been carried to Mars and back.

In sudden frenzy he began examining each article and laying it in a careless pile on the floor. He recognized a pair of idiotic Martian dolls. He found a tourist map of the ruined cities of Mars. He found a menu from the Red Sands Hotel.

And below all these there was a picture album. Alice at the Red Sands. Alice at the Phobos Oasis. Alice at the Darnella Ruins. He turned the pages of the album with numb fingers. Alice in a dozen Martian settings. Some of them were dated. About two years ago. They had gone together, Alice had said, but there was no evidence of Mel's presence on any such trip.

But it was equally impossible that Alice had made the trip, yet here was proof. Proof that swept him up in a doubting of his own senses. How could such a thing have taken place? Had he actually made such a trip and been stripped of the memory by some amnesia? Maybe he had forced himself to go with her and the power of his lifelong phobia had wiped it from his memory.

And what did it all have to do--if anything--with the unbelievable thing Dr. Winters had found about Alice?

Overcome with grief and exhaustion he sat fingering the mementos aimlessly while he stared at the pictures and the ticket envelope and the souvenirs.

* * * * *

Dr. Winters spoke a little more sharply than he intended. "I don't think anything is going to be solved by a wild-goose chase to Mars. It's going to cost you a great deal of money, and there isn't a single positive lead to any solution."

"It's the only possible explanation." Mel persisted. "Something happened on Mars to change her from what she once was to--what you saw on your operating table."

"And you are hoping that in some desperate way you will find there was a switch of personalities--that there may be a ghost of a chance of finding Alice still alive."
Mel bit his lip. He was scarcely willing to admit such a hope but it was the foundation of his decision. "I've got to do what I can," he said. "I must take the chance. The uncertainty will torment me all my life if I don't."

Dr. Winters shook his head. "I still wish I could persuade you against it. You will find only disappointment."

"My mind is made up. Will you help me or not?"

"What can I do?"

"I can't go into space unless I can find some way of lifting, even temporarily, this phobia that nearly drives me crazy at the thought of going out there. Isn't there a drug, a hypnotic method, or something to help a thing like this?"

"This isn't my field," said Dr. Winters. "But I suspect that the cause of your trouble cannot be suppressed. It will have to be lifted. Psycho-recovery is the only way to accomplish that. I can recommend a number of good men. This, too, is very expensive."

"I should have done it for Alice--long ago," said Mel.

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Dr. Martin, the psychiatrist, was deeply interested in Mel's problem. "It sounds as if it is based on some early trauma, which has long since been wiped from your conscious memory. Recovery may be easy or difficult, depending on how much suppression of the original event has taken place."

"I don't even care what the original event was," said Mel, "if you rid me of this overwhelming fear of space. Dr. Winters said he thought recovery would be required."

"He is right. No matter how much overlay you pile on top of such a phobia to suppress it, it will continue to haunt you. We can make a trial run to analyze the situation, and then we can better predict the chance of ultimate success."

As a reporter, Mel Hastings had had vague encounters with the subject of psycho-recovery, but he knew little of the details about it. He knew it involved some kind of a machine that could tap the very depths of the human mind and drag out the hidden debris accumulated in mental basements and attics. But such things had always given him the willies. He steered clear of them.

When Dr. Martin first introduced him into the psycho-recovery room his resolution almost vanished. It looked more like a complex electronic laboratory than anything else. A half dozen operators and assistants in nurses' uniforms stood by.

"If you will recline here--," Dr. Martin was saying.

Mel felt as if he were being prepared for some inhuman biological experiment. A cage of terminals was fitted to his head and a thousand small electrodes adjusted to contact with his skull. The faint hum of equipment supported the small surge of apprehension within him.

After half an hour the preparations were complete. The level of lights in the room was lowered. He could sense the operators at their panels and see dimly the figure of Dr. Martin seated near him.

"Try to recall as vividly as possible your last experience with this nightmare you have described. We will try to lock on to that and follow it on down."

This was the last thing in the world Mel wanted to do. He lay in agonized indecision, remembering that he had dreamed only a short time ago, but fighting off the actual recollection of the dream.

"Let yourself go," Dr. Martin said kindly. "Don't fight it--"

A fragment of his mind let down its guard for a brief instant. It was like touching the surface of a whirlpool. He was sucked into the sweeping depths of the dream. He sensed that he cried out in terror as he plunged. But there was no one to hear. He was alone in space.

Fear wrapped him like black, clammy fur. He felt the utter futility of even being afraid. He would simply remain as he was, and soon he would cease to be.

But they were coming again. He sensed, rather than saw them. The searchers. And his fear of them was greater than his fear of space alone. He moved. Somehow he moved, driving headlong through great vastness while the pinpoints of light grew behind him.

"Very satisfactory," Dr. Martin was saying. "An extremely satisfactory probe."

His voice came through to Mel as from beyond vast barriers of time and space. Mel felt the thick sweat that covered his body. Weakness throbbed in his muscles.

"It gives us a very solid anchor point," Dr. Martin said. "From here I think we run back to the beginning of the experience and unearth the whole thing. Are you ready, Mr. Hastings?"

Mel felt too weak to nod. "Let 'er rip!" he muttered weakly.

* * * * *

The day was warm and sunny. He and Alice had arrived early at the spaceport to enjoy the holiday excitement preceding the takeoff. It was something they had both dreamed of since they were kids--a vacation in the fabulous domed cities and ruins of Mars.
Alice was awed by her first close view of the magnificent ship lying in its water berth that opened to Lake Michigan. "It's huge--how can such an enormous ship ever get off the Earth?"

Mel laughed. "Let's not worry about that. We know it does. That's all that matters." But he could not help being impressed, too, by the enormous size and the graceful lines of the luxury ship. Unlike Alice, he was not seeing it at close range for the first time. He had met the ship scores of times in his reporting job, interviewing famous and well-known personages as they departed or arrived from the fabulous playgrounds of Mars.

"If you look carefully," Mel pointed out, "you'll see a lot of faces that make news when they come and go."

Alice's face glowed as she clung to Mel's arm and recognized some of the famous citizens who would be their fellow passengers. "This is going to be the most fun we've ever had in our lives, darling."

"Like a barrel of monkeys," Mel said casually, enjoying the bubbling excitement that was in Alice.

The ship was so completely stabilized that the passengers did not even have to sit down during takeoff. They crowded the ports to watch the land and the water shoot past as the ship skimmed half the length of Lake Michigan in its takeoff run. As it bore into the upper atmosphere on an ever-increasing angle of climb, its own artificial gravity system took over and gave the illusion of horizontal flight with the Earth receding slowly behind.

Mel and Alice wandered through the salons and along the spacious decks as if in some fairyland-come-true. All sense of time seemed to vanish and they floated with the great ship in timeless, endless space.

He wasn't quite certain when he first became aware of his own sense of disquietude. It seemed to result from a change in the members of the crew. On the morning of the third day they ceased their universal and uninterrupted concern for their passengers' entertainment and enjoyment.

Most of the passengers seemed to have taken no note of it. Mel commented to Alice. She laughed at him. "What do you expect? They've spent two full days showing us the ship and teaching us to play all the games aboard. You don't expect them to play nurse to us during the whole trip, do you?"

It sounded reasonable. "I suppose so," said Mel dubiously. "But just what are they doing? They all seem to be in such a hurry to get somewhere this morning."

"Well, they must have some duties to perform in connection with running the ship."

Mel shook his head in doubt.

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Alice joined him in wandering about the decks, kibitzing on the games of the other passengers, and watching the stars and galaxies on the telescopic screens. It was on one of these that they first saw the shadow out in space. Small at first, the black shadow crossed a single star and made it wink. That was what caught Mel's attention, a winking star in the dead night of space.

When he was sure, he called Alice's attention to it. "There's something moving out there." By now it had shape, like a tiny black bullet.

"Where? I don't see anything."

"It's crossing that patch of stars. Watch, and you can see it blot them out as it moves."

"It's another ship!" Alice exclaimed. "That's exciting! To think we're passing another ship in all this great emptiness of space! I wonder where it's coming from?"

"And where it's going to."

They watched its slow, precise movement across the stars. After several minutes a steward passed by. Mel hailed him and pointed to the screen. "Can you tell us what that other ship is?"

The steward glanced and seemed to recognize it instantly. But he paused in replying. "That's the Mars liner," he said finally. "In just a few minutes the public address system will announce contact and change of ship."

"Change of ship?" Mel asked, puzzled. "I never heard anything about a change of ship."

"Oh, yes," the steward said. "This is only the shuttle that we're on now. We transfer to the liner for the remainder of the trip. I'm sure that was explained to you at the time you purchased your tickets." He hurried away.

Mel was quite sure no such thing had been explained to him when he purchased tickets. He turned back to the screen and watched the black ship growing swiftly larger now as it and the Martian Princess approached on contact courses.

The public address system came alive suddenly. "This is your Captain. All passengers will now prepare to leave the shuttle and board the Mars liner. Hand luggage should be made ready. All luggage stowed in the hold will be transferred without your attention. It has been a pleasure to have you aboard. Contact with the liner will be made in fifteen minutes."

From the buzz around him Mel knew that this was as much a surprise to everyone else as it was to him, but it was greeted with excitement and without question.

Even Alice was growing excited now and others crowded around them when it was discovered what they were viewing. "It looks big," said Alice in subdued voice. "Bigger than this ship by far."
Mel moved away and let the others have his place before the screen. His sense of uneasiness increased as he contemplated the approach of that huge black ship. And he was convinced its color was black, that it was not just the monotone of the view screen that made it so.

Why should there be such a transfer of passengers in mid-space? The Martian Princess was certainly adequate to make the journey to Mars. Actually they were more than a third of the way there, already. He wasn't sure why he felt so certain something was amiss. Surely there was no possibility that the great Connemorra Lines would plan any procedure to the detriment of the more than five thousand passengers aboard the ship. His uneasiness was pretty stupid, he thought.

But it wouldn't go away.

He returned to the crowd clustered at the viewing screen and took Alice by the arm to draw her away.

She looked quizzically at him. "This is the most exciting thing yet. I want to watch it."

"We haven't got much time," Mel said. "We've got a lot of things to get in our suitcases. Let's go down to our stateroom."

"Everyone else has to pack, too. There's no hurry."

"Fifteen minutes, the Captain said. We don't want to be the last ones."

Unwillingly, Alice followed. Their stateroom was a long way from the salon. The fifteen minutes were almost up by the time they reached it.

* * * * *

Mel closed the door to their room and put his hands on Alice's shoulders. He glanced about warily. "Alice--I don't want to go aboard that ship. There's something wrong about this whole thing. I don't know what it is, but we're not going aboard."

Alice stared at him. "Have you lost your mind? After all our hopes and all our planning you don't want to go on to Mars?"

Mel felt as if a wall had suddenly sprung up between them. He clutched Alice's shoulders desperately in his hands. "Alice--I don't think that ship out there is going to Mars. I know it sounds crazy, but please listen to me--we weren't told anything about the Martian Princess being merely a shuttle and that we'd transfer to another ship out here. No one was told. The Martian Princess is a space liner perfectly capable of going to Mars. There's no reason why such a huge ship should be used merely as a shuttle."

"That ship out there is bigger."

"Why? Do we need any more room to finish the journey?"

Alice shook herself out of his grasp. "I don't know the answers to those questions and I don't care to know them!" she said angrily.

"If you think I'm going to give up this vacation and turn right around here in space and go back home you're crazy. If you go back you'll go back alone!"

Alice whirled and ran to the door. Mel ran after her, but she was through the door and was melting into the moving throng by the time he reached the door. He took a step to follow, then halted. He couldn't drag her forcibly back into the stateroom. Maybe she'd return in a few minutes to pack her bags. He went back in the room and closed the door.

* * * * *

Even as he did so he knew that he was guessing wrong. Alice would be matching him in a game of nerves. She'd go on to the other ship, expecting him to pack the bags and follow. He sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands for a moment. A faint shudder passed through the ship and he heard the hollow ring of clashing metal. The unknown ship had made contact with the Martian Princess. Their airlocks were being mated now.

From the porthole he could see the incredible mass of the ship. He crossed the room and pressed the curtains aside. His impression had been right. The ship was black. Black, nameless, and blind. No insignia or portholes were visible anywhere on the hull within his range of vision.

He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew above all else that he wasn't going to board that ship. He paced the floor telling himself it was a stupid, neurotic apprehension that filled his mind, that the great Connemorra Lines could not be involved in any nefarious acts involving five thousand people--or even one person. They couldn't afford such risk.

He couldn't shake it. He was certain that, no matter what the cost, he was not going to board that black ship. He looked about the stateroom. He couldn't remain here. They'd certainly find him. He had to hide somewhere. He stood motionless, staring out the porthole. There was no place he could hide with assurance inside the ship.

But what about outside?

His thoughts crumpled in indecision as he thought of Alice. Yet whatever the black ship meant, he could help no one if he went aboard. He had to get back to Earth and try to find out what it was all about and alert the
authorities. Only in that way could he hope to help Alice.

* * * * *

He opened the stateroom door cautiously and stepped out. The corridor was filled with hurrying passengers, carrying hand luggage, laughing with each other in excitement. He joined them, moving slowly, alert for crew members. There seemed to be none of the latter in the corridors.

Keeping close to the wall, he moved with the crowd until he reached the rounded niche that marked an escape chamber. As if pushed by the hurrying throng, he backed into it, the automatic doors opening and closing to receive him.

The chamber was one of scores stationed throughout the ship as required by law. The escape chambers contained space suits for personal exit from the ship in case of emergency. They were never expected to be used. In any emergency requiring abandonment of the vessel it would be as suicidal to go into space in a suit as to remain with the ship. But fusty lawmakers had decreed their necessity, and passengers received a perfunctory briefing in the use of the chambers and the suits--which they promptly forgot.

Mel wrestled now with what he remembered of the instructions. He inspected a suit hanging in its cabinet and then was relieved to find that the instructions were repeated on a panel of the cabinet. Slowly, he donned the suit, following the step by step instructions as he went. He began to sweat profusely from his exertions and from his fear of discovery.

He finally succeeded in getting the cumbersome gear adjusted and fastened without being detected. He did not know if the airlock of the chamber had some kind of alarm that would alert the crew when it was opened. That was a chance he had to take. He discovered that it was arranged so that it could be opened only by a key operated from within the suit. This was obviously to prevent anyone leaving the ship unprotected. Perhaps with this safeguard there was no alarm.

He twisted the lock and entered the chamber. He opened the outer door and faced the night of space.

* * * * *

He would not have believed that anything could be so utterly terrifying. His knees buckled momentarily and left him clinging to the side of the port. Sweat burst anew from every pore. Blindly, he pressed the jet control and forced himself into space.

He arced a short distance along the curve of the ship and then forced himself down into contact with the hull. He clung by foot and hand magnetic pads, sick with nausea and vertigo.

He had believed that by clinging to the outside of the hull he could escape detection and endure the flight back to Earth. In his sickness of body and mind the whole plan now looked like utter folly. He retched and closed his eyes and lay on the hull through the beginning of an eternity.

* * * * *

He had no concept of time. The chronometer in the suit was not working. But it seemed as if many hours had passed when he felt a faint shock pass through the hull beneath him. He felt a momentary elation. The ships had separated. The search for him--if any--had been abandoned.

Slowly he inched his way around the hull to get a glimpse of the black ship. It was still there, standing off a few hundred yards but not moving. Its presence dismayed him. There could be no reason now for the two ships to remain together. The Martian Princess should be turning around for the return to Earth.

Then out of the corner of his eye he saw it. A trace of movement. A gleam of light. Like a small moon it edged up the distant curvature of the hull. Then there were more--a nest of quivering satellites.

Without thought, Mel pressed the jet control and hurled himself into space.

He looked toward the Martian Princess and the searchers on the hull. He cried out in the soundless dark. The searchers had left the hull and were pursuing him through open space. Their speed far exceeded his. It was futile to run before them--and futile to leave the haven of the Martian Princess. His only chance of survival or success lay in getting to Earth aboard the ship. In a long curve he arced back toward the ship. Instantly, the searchers moved to close in the arc and meet him on a collision course.

He could see them now. They were not crewmen in spacesuits as he had supposed. Rather, the objects--two of them--looked like miniature spaceships. Beams of light bore through space ahead of them, and he suspected they
carried other radiations also to detect by radar and infra red.

In the depths of his mind he knew they were not of the Martian Princess. Nor were there any crewmen within
them. They were robot craft of some kind, and they had come from the great black ship.

He felt their searching beams upon him and waited for a deadly, blasting burst of heat or killing radiation. He
was not prepared for what happened.

They closed swiftly, and the nearest robot came within a dozen feet, matching Mel's own velocity. Suddenly,
from a small opening in the machine, a slender metal tentacle whipped out and wrapped about him like the coils of
a snake. The second robot approached and added another binding. Mel's arms and legs were pinned. Frantically, he
manipulated the jet control in the glove of the suit. This only caused the tentacles to cut deeply and painfully, and
threatened to smash the shell of the suit. He cut the jets and admitted the failure of his frantic mission.

In short minutes they were near the ships again. Mel wondered what kind of reprimand the crewmen of the
Martian Princess could give him, and what fantastic justification they might offer for their own actions.

But he wasn't being taken toward the Martian Princess. He twisted painfully in the grip of the robot tentacles
and confirmed that he was being carried to the black stranger.

Soundlessly, a port slid open and the robots swept him through into the dark interior of the ship. He felt himself
dropped on a hard metal floor. The tentacles unwound. Alone, he struggled to his feet and flashed a beam of light
from the suit flashlight to the walls about him. Walls, floor and ceiling were an indistinguishable dark gray. He was
the only object in the chamber.

While he strained his sight to establish features in the blank metallic surfaces a clipped, foreign voice spoke.
"Remove your suit and walk toward the opening in the wall. Do not try to run or attack. You will not be harmed
unless you attack."

There was no use refusing. He did as commanded. A bright doorway opened in the wall before him. He walked
through.

It reminded him of a medical laboratory. Shelves and cabinets of hand instruments and electronic equipment
were about. And in the room three men sat watching the doorway through which he entered. He gazed at the
strangers as they at him.

They looked ordinary enough in their white surgeons' smocks. All seemed to be of middle age, with dark hair
turning gray at the fringe. One was considerably more muscular than the other two. One leaned to overweight. The
third was quite thin. Yet Mel felt himself bristling like a dog in the dark of the moon.

No matter how ordinary they looked, these three were not men of Earth. The certainty of this settled like a cold,
dead weight in the pit of his stomach.

"You--" he stammered. There was nothing to say.

"Please recline on this couch," the nearest, the muscular one said. "We wish you no harm so do not be afraid.
We wish only to determine if you have been harmed by your flight into space."

All three of them were tense and Mel was sure they were worried--by his escapade. Had he nearly let some
unknown cat out of the bag?

"Please--," the muscular one said.

He had no alternative. He might struggle, and destroy a good deal of apparatus, but he could not hope to
overwhelm them. He lay on the couch as directed. Almost instantly the overweight one was behind him, seizing his
arm. He felt the sting of a needle. The thin one was at his feet, looking down at him soberly. "He will rest," the thin
one said, "and then we shall know what needs to be done."

The sleep had lasted for an eon, he thought. He had a sense of the passage of an enormous span of time when
he at last awoke. His vision was fuzzy, but there was no mistaking the image before him.

Alice. His Alice--safe.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling down at him. He fought his way up to a half-sitting position.
"Alice!" He wept.

Afterwards, he said, "Where are we? What happened? I remember so many crazy things--the vacation to Mars."

"Don't try to remember it all, darling," she said. "You were sick. Some kind of hysteria and amnesia hit you
while we were there. We're home now. You'll soon be out of the hospital and everything will be all right."

"I spoiled it," he murmured. "I spoiled it all for you."

"No. I knew you were going to be all right. I even had a lot of fun all by myself. But we're going back. As soon
as you are all well again we'll start saving up and go again."

He nodded drowsily. "Sure. We'll go to Mars again and have a real vacation."

Alice faded away. All of it faded away.
As if from a far distance the walls of Dr. Martin's laboratory seemed to close about him and the lights slowly increased. Dr. Martin was seated beside him, his head shaking slowly. "I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Hastings. I thought we were going to get the full and true event this time. But it often happens, as in your case, that fantasy lies upon fantasy, and it is necessary to dig through great layers of them before uncovering the truth. I think, however, that we shall not have to go much deeper to find the underlying truth for you."

Mel lay on the couch, continuing to stare at the ceiling. "Then there was no great, black ship out of space?"

"Of course not! That is one danger of these analyses, Mr. Hastings. You must not be deceived into believing that a newly discovered fantasy is the truth for which you were looking. You must come back and continue your search."

"Yes. Yes, of course." He got up slowly and was helped to the outer room by the Doctor and an attendant. The attendant gave him a glass of white, sweetish substance to drink.

"A booster-upper," laughed Dr. Martin. "It takes away the grogginess that sometimes attends such a deep sweep. We will look for you day after tomorrow."

Mel nodded and stepped out into the hall.

* * *

No great black ship.
No mysterious little robot ships with tentacles that whip out and capture a man.
No strange trio in surgeons' gowns.
And no Alice--

A sudden spear of thought pierced his mind. Maybe all that was illusion, too. Maybe he could go home right now and find her waiting for him. Maybe--

No. That was real enough. The accident. Dr. Winters. The scene in the icy room next to Surgery at the hospital. Dr. Martin didn't know about that. He would have called that a fantasy, too, if Mel had tried to tell him.

No. It was all real.
The unbelievable, alien organs of Alice.
The great, black ship.
The mindless robot searchers.
His nightmare had stemmed from all this that had happened out in space, which had somehow been wiped from his conscious memory. The nightmare had not existed in his boyhood, as he had thought. It was oriented in time now.

But what had happened to Alice? There was no clue in the memory unearthed by Dr. Martin. Was her condition merely the result of some freak heredity or gene mutation?

The surging turmoil in his mind was greater than before. There was only one way to quiet it--that was to carry out his original plan to go to Mars.

He'd go out there again. He'd find out if the black ship existed or not.

The girl in the ticket office was kind but firm. "Our records show that you were a vacationer to Mars very recently. The demand is so great and the ship capacity so small that we must limit vacation trips to no more than one in any ten-year period."

He turned away and went down the hall and out the doorway of the marble and brass Connemorra Lines Building.

He walked through town for six blocks and the thought of old Jake Norton came to his mind. Jake had been an old timer in the city room when Mel was a cub. Jake had retired just a few months ago and lived in a place in town with a lot of other old men. Mel hailed the nearest cab and drove to Jake's place.

"Mel, it's great to see you!" Jake said. "I didn't think any of the boys would remember an old man after he'd walked out for the last time."

"People remember real easy when they want favors."

"Sure," Jake said with a grin, "but there's not much of a favor I can do you any more, boy. Can't even loan you a ten until next payday."

"Jake, you can help me," said Mel. "You don't expect to ever take a trip to Mars, do you?"

"Mars! Are you crazy, Mel?"

"I went once. I've got to go again. It's about Alice. And they won't let me. I didn't know you could go only once in ten years."

Jake remembered. Alice had called him and all the other boys after they'd come back the other time. Mel had been sick, she said. He wouldn't remember the trip. They were asked not to say anything about it. Now Mel was
remembering and wanted to go again. Jake didn't know what he should do.

"What can I do to help you?" he asked.

"I'll give you the money. Buy a ticket in your name. I'll go as Jake Norton. I think I can get away with it. I don't think they make any closer check than that."

"Sure—if it'll do you any good," Jake said hesitantly. He was remembering the anxiety in Alice's voice the day she called and begged him not to say anything that would remind Mel of Mars. No one ever had, as far as Jake knew.

He took the money and Mel waited at the old men's home. An hour later Jake called. "Eight months is the closest reservation I can get at normal rates, but I know of some scalpers who charge 50% more."

Mel groaned. "Buy it no matter what the cost! I've got to go at once!" He would be broke for the next ten years.

* * * * *

It was little different from the other time. There was the same holiday excitement in the crowd of vacationers and those who had come to see them off. It was the same ship, even.

All that was different was the absence of Alice.

He stayed in his stateroom and didn't watch the takeoff. He felt the shift as the artificial gravity took over. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes as the Martian Princess sought the cold night of space.

For two days he remained in the room, emerging only for meals. The trip itself held no interest for him. He waited only for the announcement that the black ship had come.

But by the end of the second day it had not come. Mel spent a sleepless night staring out at the endless horizon of stars. Dr. Martin had been right, he thought. There was no black ship. He had merely substituted one illusion for another. Where was reality? Did it exist anywhere in all the world?

Yet, even if there were no black ship, his goal was still Mars.

The third day passed without the appearance of the black ship. But on the very evening of that day the speaker announced: "All passengers will prepare for transfer from the shuttle ship to the Mars liner. Bring hand luggage--"

Mel sat paralyzed while he listened to the announcement. So it was true! He felt the faint jar that rocked the Martian Princess as the two ships coupled. From his stateroom port Mel could see the stranger, black, ugly, and somehow deadly. He wished he could show Dr. Martin this "illusion"!

He packed swiftly and left the room. Mel joined the surprised and excited throng now, not hanging back, but eager to find out the secret of the great black ship.

The transition from one ship to the other was almost imperceptible. The structure of both corridors was the same, but Mel knew when the junction was crossed. He sensed the entry into a strange world that was far different from the common one he knew.

Far down the corridor the crowd was slowing, forming into lines before stewards who were checking tickets. The passengers were shunted into branching corridors leading to their own staterooms. So far everything was so utterly normal that Mel felt an overwhelming despondency. It was just as they had been told; they were transferring to the Mars liner from the shuttle.

The steward glanced at his ticket, held it for a moment of hesitation while he scanned Mel's face. "Mr. Norton—please come with me."

The steward moved away in a direction no other passengers were taking. Another steward moved up to his place. "That way," the second man said to Mel. "Follow the steward."

* * * * *

Mel's heart picked up its beat as he stepped out of the line and moved slowly down the corridor after the retreating steward. They walked a long way through branching silent corridors that showed no sign of life.

They stopped at last before a door that was like a score of others they had passed. There were no markings. The steward opened the door and stood aside. "In here please," he said. Mel entered and found himself alone. The steward remained outside.

The room was furnished as an office. It was carpeted and paneled luxuriously. A door leading from a room at his left opened and admitted a tall man with graying hair. The man seemed to carry an aura of power and strength as he moved. An aura that Mel Hastings recognized.

"James Connemorra!" Mel exclaimed.

The man bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Yes, Mr. Hastings," he said.

Mel was dismayed. "How do you know who I am?" he said.

James Connemorra looked through the port beside Mel and at the stars beyond. "I have been looking for you long enough I ought to know who you are."

Something in the man's voice chilled Mel. "I have been easy enough to find. I'm only a news reporter. Why
have you been looking for me?"
 Connemorra sank into a deep chair on the opposite side of the room. "Can't you guess?" he said.
 "It has something to do with what happened--before?" Mel asked. He backed warily against the opposite wall
 from Connemorra. "That time when I escaped from the Martian Princess rather than come aboard the black ship?"
 Connemorra nodded. "Yes."
 "I still don't understand. Why?"
 "It's an old story." Connemorra shrugged faintly. "A man learns too much about things he should know nothing
 of."
 "I have a right to know what happened to my wife. You know about her don't you?"
 Connemorra nodded.
 "What happened to her? Why was she different after her trip to Mars?"
 James Connemorra was silent for so long that Mel thought he had not heard him. "Is everyone different when
 they get back?" Mel demanded. "Does something happen to everybody who takes the Mars trip, the same thing that
 happened to Alice?"
 "You learned so much," said Connemorra, speaking as if to himself, "I had to hunt you down and bring you
 here."
 "What do you mean by that? I came through my own efforts. Your office tried to stop me."
 "Yet I knew who you were and that you were here. I must have had something to do with it, don't you think?"
 "What?"
 "I forced you to come by deception, so that no one knows you are here--except the old man whose name you
 used. Who will believe him that you came on the Martian Princess? Our records will show that a Jake Norton will be
 there on Earth. No one can ever prove that Mel Hastings ever came aboard."

* * * * *

Mel let his breath out slowly. His fear suddenly swallowed caution. He took a crouching step forward. Then he
 stopped, frozen. James Connemorra tilted the small pistol resting in his lap. Mel did not know how it came to be
 there. He had not seen it a moment ago.
 "What are you going to do?" Mel demanded. "What are you going to do with all of us?"
 "You know too much," said Connemorra, shrugging in mock helplessness. "What can I do with you?"
 "Explain what I don't understand about the things you say I know."
 "Explain to you?" The idea seemed to amuse Connemorra greatly, as if it had some utterly ridiculous aspect.
 "Yes, I might as well explain," he said. "I haven't had anyone interested enough to listen for a long time.
 "Men have never been alone in space. We have been watched, inspected, and studied periodically since
 Neanderthal times by races in the galaxy who have preceded us in development by hundreds of thousands of years.
 These observers have been pleasantly excited by some of the things we have done, appalled by others.
 "There is a galactic organization that has existed for at least a hundred thousand years. This organization exists
 for the purpose of mutual development of the worlds and races of the galaxy. It also exists to maintain peace, for
 there were ages before its organization when interstellar war took place, and more than one great world was wiped
 out in such senseless wars.
 "When men of Earth were ready to step into space, the Galactic Council had to decide, as it had decided on so
 many other occasions, whether the new world was to be admitted as a member. The choice is not one which a new
 world is invited to make; the choice is made for it. A world which begins to send its ships through space becomes a
 member of the Council, or its ships cease to travel. The world itself may cease to exist."
 "You mean this dictatorial Council determines whether a world is fit to survive and actually wipes out those it
 decides against?" gasped Mel in horror. "They set themselves up as judges in the Universe?"
 "That's about the way they operate, to put it bluntly," said Connemorra. "You can call them a thousand
 unpleasant names, but you can't change the fact of their existence, nor the fact of their successful operation for a
 period as long as the age of the human race.
 "They would never have made their existence known to us if we had not begun sending our ships into space.
 But once we did that we were entering territory staked out by races that were there when we crawled out of our
 caves. Who can say what their rights are?"
 "But to pass judgment on entire worlds--"
 "We have no choice but to accept that such judgment is passed."
 "And their judgment of Earth--?"
 "Was that Earth was not ready for Council membership. Earthmen are still making too many blunders to join
 creatures that could cross the galaxy at the speed of light when we were learning how to chip flint."
 "But they didn't wipe us out!"
James Connemorra looked out at the stars. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder--"
"What do you mean?" Mel said in a tight voice.
"We have defects which are not quite like any they have encountered before. We have developed skills in the
manufacture of artifacts, but we have no capacity for using them. For example, we have developed vast systems of
communication, but these systems have not improved our communications they have actually blocked
communication."

"That's crazy!" said Mel. "Do they suppose smoke signals are superior to the 3-d screens in our homes?"
"As a matter of fact, they do. And so do I. When a man must resort to smoke signals he is very certain that he
has something to say before he goes to the trouble of putting the message in the air. But our fabulous screens prevent
us from communicating with each other by throwing up a wall of pseudo-communication that we can't get through.
We subject ourselves to a barrage of sound and light that has a communication content of almost zero.
"The same is true of our inventions in transportation. We have efficient means of travel to all parts of the world
and now to the Universe itself. But we don't travel. We use our machines to block traveling."
"I can understand the first argument, but not this one!" said Mel.
"We move our bodies to new locations with our machines, but our minds remain at home. We take our rutted
thoughts, our predispositions, our cultural concepts wherever we go. We do not touch, even with a fragment of our
minds, that which our machines give us contact with. We do not travel. We move in space, but we do not travel.
"This is their accusation. And they're right. We are still doing what we have always done. We are using space
flight for the boring, the trivial, the stupid; using genius for a toy, like a child banging an atomic watch on the floor.
It happened with all our great discoveries and inventions: the gasoline engine, the telephone, the wireless. We've
built civilizations of monumental stupidity on the wonders of nature. One race of the Galactics has a phrase they
apply to people like us: 'If there is a God in Heaven He has wept for ten thousand years.'

"But all this is not the worst. A race that is merely stupid seldom gets out to space. But ours has something else
they fear: destructiveness. They have plotted our history and extrapolated our future. If they let us come out, war and
conflict will follow."
"They can't know that!"
"They say they can. We are in no position to argue."
"So they plan to destroy us--"
"No. They want to try an experiment that has been carried out just a few times previously. They are going to
reduce us from what they term the critical mass which we have achieved."
"Critical mass? That's a nuclear term."
"Right. Meaning ready to blow up. That's where we are. Two not-so-minor nuclear wars in fifty years. They see
us carrying our destructiveness into space, fighting each other there, infecting other races with our hostility. But if
we are broken down into smaller groups, have the tools of war removed, and are forced to take another line of
development--well, they have hopes of salvaging us."
"But they can't do a thing like that to us! What do they intend? Taking groups of Earthmen, deporting them to
other worlds--breaking them apart from each other forever--?"

The coldness found its resting place in Mel's chest. He stared at James Connemorra. Then his eyes moved
slowly over the walls of the room in the black ship and out to the stars. The black ship.
"This ship--! You transfer your passengers to this Galactic ship for deportation to other worlds! But they come
back--"
"They are sent to colonies on other worlds where conditions are like those on Earth--with significant
exceptions. The colonies are small, the largest are only a few thousand. The problems there are different than on
Earth--and they are tough. The natural resources are not the same. The development of the resulting cultures will be
vastly different from that of Earth. The Galactic Council is very interested in the outcome--which will not be known
with certainty for a thousand years or so."
"But they come back," Mel repeated. "You bring them back!"
"For each Earthman who goes out, a replacement is sent back. The replacement is an android supplied by the
Council."
"Android!" Mel felt his reason slipping. He knew he was shouting. "Then Alice--the Alice that died was an
android, she was not my wife! My Alice is still alive! You can take me to her--?"
Connemorra nodded. "Alice is still alive, and well. No harm has come to her."
"Take me to her!" Mel knew he was pleading, but in his anguish he had no pride.
Connemorra seemed to ignore his plea. "Earth's population is slowly being diluted by the removal of top
people. The androids behave in every way like the individuals they replace, but they are preconditioned against the inherent destructiveness of Earthmen."

Blind anger seemed to rise within Mel. "You have no right to separate me from Alice. Take me to her!"

His rage ignited and he leaped forward.

The small gun in Connemorra's hand spurted twice. Mel felt a double impact in a moment of great wonder. It couldn't end like this, he thought. It couldn't end without his seeing Alice once more. Just once more--

* * * * *

He sank to the floor. The pain was not great, but he knew he was dying. He looked down at his hand that covered the great wound in his mid-section. There was something wrong.

He felt the stickiness, but the red blood was not welling out. Instead, a thick bubble of green ooze moved from the wound and spread over his clothes and his hand. An alien greenness that was like nothing human.

He had seen it once before.

Alice.

He stared up at Connemorra with wide, wondering eyes.

"Everything went wrong, my poor android," said Connemorra softly. "After your human was brought back to the ship we were forced to go through with the usual process of imprinting his mind content upon his android. But we had to wipe out all memory of the attempted escape from the Martian Princess. This was not successful. It still clung in the nightmares you experienced. And the psycho-recovery brought it all back.

"We tried to cover it with an amnesiac condition instead of the usual pre-printed memory of a Mars vacation. And all this might have worked if the Alice android had not been defective also. A normal android has protective mechanisms that make accidents and subsequent discovery impossible. But the Alice android failed, and you set out on a course to uncover us. I had to find a way to destroy you--murder.

"I'm truly sorry. I don't know how an android thinks or feels. Sometimes I'm afraid of all of you. You are like men, but I've seen the factories in which you are produced. There are many things I do not know. I know only that I had to obey the Galactic Council or Earth would have been destroyed long ago.

"And something else I know: Alice and Mel Hastings are content and happy. They are on a lovely world, very much like Central Valley."

He closed his eyes as he felt the life--or whatever it was--seeping out of him. It came out right, after all, he thought.

Like a wooden soldier with a painted smile, fallen from a shelf, he lay twisted upon the floor.

THE END

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Contents

THE MOON IS GREEN
By FRITZ LEIBER

Anybody who wanted to escape death could, by paying a very simple price--denial of life!

"Effie! What the devil are you up to?"

Her husband's voice, chopping through her mood of terrified rapture, made her heart jump like a startled cat, yet by some miracle of feminine self-control her body did not show a tremor.

Dear God, she thought, he mustn't see it. It's so beautiful, and he always kills beauty.

"I'm just looking at the Moon," she said listlessly. "It's green."

Mustn't, mustn't see it. And now, with luck, he wouldn't. For the face, as if it also heard and sensed the menace in the voice, was moving back from the window's glow into the outside dark, but slowly, reluctantly, and still faunlike, pleading, cajoling, tempting, and incredibly beautiful.

"Close the shutters at once, you little fool, and come away from the window!"

"Green as a beer bottle," she went on dreamily, "green as emeralds, green as leaves with sunshine striking through them and green grass to lie on." She couldn't help saying those last words. They were her token to the face, even though it couldn't hear.

"Effie!"

She knew what that last tone meant. Warily she swung shut the ponderous lead inner shutters and drove home the heavy bolts. That hurt her fingers; it always did, but he mustn't know that.
"You know that those shutters are not to be touched! Not for five more years at least!"

"I only wanted to look at the Moon," she said, turning around, and then it was all gone—the face, the night, the Moon, the magic—and she was back in the grubby, stale little hole, facing an angry, stale little man. It was then that the eternal thud of the air-conditioning fans and the crackle of the electrostatic precipitators that sieved out the dust reached her consciousness again like the bite of a dentist's drill.

"Only wanted to look at the Moon!" he mimicked her in falsetto. "Only wanted to die like a little fool and make me that much more ashamed of you!" Then his voice went gruff and professional. "Here, count yourself."

She silently took the Geiger counter he held at arm's length, waited until it settled down to a steady ticking slower than a clock—due only to cosmic rays and indicating nothing dangerous—and then began to comb her body with the instrument. First her head and shoulders, then out along her arms and back along their under side. There was something oddly voluptuous about her movements, although her features were gray and sagging.

The ticking did not change its tempo until she came to her waist. Then it suddenly spurted, clicking faster and faster. Her husband gave an excited grunt, took a quick step forward, froze. She goggled for a moment in fear, then grinned foolishly, dug in the pocket of her grimy apron and guiltily pulled out a wristwatch.

He grabbed it as it dangled from her fingers, saw that it had a radium dial, cursed, heaved it up as if to smash it on the floor, but instead put it carefully on the table.

"You imbecile, you incredible imbecile," he softly chanted to himself through clenched teeth, with eyes half closed.

She shrugged faintly, put the Geiger counter on the table, and stood there slumped.

He waited until the chanting had soothed his anger, before speaking again. He said quietly, "I do suppose you still realize the sort of world you're living in?"

* * * * *

She nodded slowly, staring at nothingness. Oh, she realized, all right, realized only too well. It was the world that hadn't realized. The world that had gone on stockpiling hydrogen bombs. The world that had put those bombs in cobalt shells, although it had promised it wouldn't, because the cobalt made them much more terrible and cost no more. The world that had started throwing those bombs, always telling itself that it hadn't thrown enough of them yet to make the air really dangerous with the deadly radioactive dust that came from the cobalt. Thrown them and kept on throwing until the danger point, where air and ground would become fatal to all human life, was approached.

Then, for about a month, the two great enemy groups had hesitated. And then each, unknown to the other, had decided it could risk one last gigantic and decisive attack without exceeding the danger point. It had been planned to strip off the cobalt cases, but someone forgot and then there wasn't time. Besides, the military scientists of each group were confident that the lands of the other had got the most dust. The two attacks came within an hour of each other.

After that, the Fury. The Fury of doomed men who think only of taking with them as many as possible of the enemy, and in this case—they hoped—all. The Fury of suicides who know they have botched up life for good. The Fury of cocksure men who realize they have been outsmarted by fate, the enemy, and themselves, and know that they will never be able to improvise a defense when arraigned before the high court of history—and whose unadmitted hope is that there will be no high court of history left to arraign them. More cobalt bombs were dropped during the Fury than in all the preceding years of the war.

After the Fury, the Terror. Men and women with death sifting into their bones through their nostrils and skin, fighting for bare survival under a dust-hazed sky that played fantastic tricks with the light of Sun and Moon, like the dust from Krakatoa that drifted around the world for years. Cities, countryside, and air were alike poisoned, alive with deadly radiation.

The only realistic chance for continued existence was to retire, for the five or ten years the radiation would remain deadly, to some well-sealed and radiation-shielded place that must also be copiously supplied with food, water, power, and a means of air-conditioning.

Such places were prepared by the far-seeing, seized by the stronger, defended by them in turn against the desperate hordes of the dying ... until there were no more of those.

After that, only the waiting, the enduring. A mole's existence, without beauty or tenderness, but with fear and guilt as constant companions. Never to see the Sun, to walk among the trees—or even know if there were still trees.

Oh, yes, she realized what the world was like.

* * * * *

"You understand, too, I suppose, that we were allowed to reclaim this ground-level apartment only because the Committee believed us to be responsible people, and because I've been making a damn good showing lately?"

"Yes, Hank."

"I thought you were eager for privacy. You want to go back to the basement tenements?"
God, no! Anything rather than that fetid huddling, that shameless communal sprawl. And yet, was this so much better? The nearness to the surface was meaningless; it only tantalized. And the privacy magnified Hank.

She shook her head dutifully and said, "No, Hank."

"Then why aren't you careful? I've told you a million times, Effie, that glass is no protection against the dust that's outside that window. The lead shutter must never be touched! If you make one single slip like that and it gets around, the Committee will send us back to the lower levels without blinking an eye. And they'll think twice before trusting me with any important jobs."

"I'm sorry, Hank."

"Sorry? What's the good of being sorry? The only thing that counts is never to make a slip! Why the devil do you do such things, Effie? What drives you to it?"

She swallowed. "It's just that it's so dreadful being cooped up like this," she said hesitatingly, "shut away from the sky and the Sun. I'm just hungry for a little beauty."

"And do you suppose I'm not?" he demanded. "Don't you suppose I want to get outside, too, and be carefree and have a good time? But I'm not so damn selfish about it. I want my children to enjoy the Sun, and my children's children. Don't you see that that's the all-important thing and that we have to behave like mature adults and make sacrifices for it?"

"Yes, Hank."

He surveyed her slumped figure, her lined and listless face. "You're a fine one to talk about hunger for beauty," he told her. Then his voice grew softer, more deliberate. "You haven't forgotten, have you, Effie, that until last month the Committee was so concerned about your sterility? That they were about to enter my name on the list of those waiting to be allotted a free woman? Very high on the list, too!"

She could nod even at that one, but not while looking at him. She turned away. She knew very well that the Committee was justified in worrying about the birth rate. When the community finally moved back to the surface again, each additional healthy young person would be an asset, not only in the struggle for bare survival, but in the resumed war against Communism which some of the Committee members still counted on.

It was natural that they should view a sterile woman with disfavor, and not only because of the waste of her husband's germ-plasm, but because sterility might indicate that she had suffered more than the average from radiation. In that case, if she did bear children later on, they would be more apt to carry a defective heredity, producing an undue number of monsters and freaks in future generations, and so contaminating the race.

Of course she understood it. She could hardly remember the time when she didn't. Years ago? Centuries? There wasn't much difference in a place where time was endless.

* * * * *

His lecture finished, her husband smiled and grew almost cheerful.

"Now that you're going to have a child, that's all in the background again. Do you know, Effie, that when I first came in, I had some very good news for you? I'm to become a member of the Junior Committee and the announcement will be made at the banquet tonight." He cut short her mumbled congratulations. "So brighten yourself up and put on your best dress. I want the other Juniors to see what a handsome wife the new member has got." He paused. "Well, get a move on!"

She spoke with difficulty, still not looking at him. "I'm terribly sorry, Hank, but you'll have to go alone. I'm not well."

"Of course you won't," he retorted sharply. "As it is, I have to spend half my energy running around making excuses for you--why you're so odd, why you always seem to be ailing, why you're always stupid and snobbish and say the wrong thing. But tonight's really important, Effie. It will cause a lot of bad comment if the new member's wife isn't present. You know how just a hint of sickness starts the old radiation-disease rumor going. You've got to come, Effie."

She shook her head helplessly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, come on!" he shouted, advancing on her. "This is just a silly mood. As soon as you get going, you'll snap out of it. There's nothing really wrong with you at all."

He put his hand on her shoulder to turn her around, and at his touch her face suddenly grew so desperate and gray that for a moment he was alarmed in spite of himself.

"Really?" he asked, almost with a note of concern.

She nodded miserably.
"Hmm!" He stepped back and strode about irresolutely. "Well, of course, if that's the way it is ..." He checked himself and a sad smile crossed his face. "So you don't care enough about your old husband's success to make one supreme effort in spite of feeling bad?"

Again the helpless headshake. "I just can't go out tonight, under any circumstances." And her gaze stole toward the lead shutters.

He was about to say something when he caught the direction of her gaze. His eyebrows jumped. For seconds he stared at her incredulously, as if some completely new and almost unbelievable possibility had popped into his mind. The look of incredulity slowly faded, to be replaced by a harder, more calculating expression. But when he spoke again, his voice was shockingly bright and kind.

"Well, it can't be helped naturally, and I certainly wouldn't want you to go if you weren't able to enjoy it. So you hop right into bed and get a good rest. I'll run over to the men's dorm to freshen up. No, really, I don't want you to have to make any effort at all. Incidentally, Jim Barnes isn't going to be able to come to the banquet either--touch of the old 'flu, he tells me, of all things."

He watched her closely as he mentioned the other man's name, but she didn't react noticeably. In fact, she hardly seemed to be hearing his chatter.

"I got a bit sharp with you, I'm afraid, Effie," he continued contritely. "I'm sorry about that. I was excited about my new job and I guess that was why things upset me. Made me feel let down when I found you weren't feeling as good as I was. Selfish of me. Now you get into bed right away and get well. Don't worry about me a bit. I know you'd come if you possibly could. And I know you'll be thinking about me. Well, I must be off now."

He started toward her, as if to embrace her, then seemed to think better of it. He turned back at the doorway and said, emphasizing the words, "You'll be completely alone for the next four hours." He waited for her nod, then bounced out.

* * * * *

She stood still until his footsteps died away. Then she straightened up, walked over to where he'd put down the wristwatch, picked it up and smashed it hard on the floor. The crystal shattered, the case flew apart, and something went zing!

She stood there breathing heavily. Slowly her sagged features lifted, formed themselves into the beginning of a smile. She stole another look at the shutters. The smile became more definite. She felt her hair, wet her fingers and ran them along her hairline and back over her ears. After wiping her hands on her apron, she took it off. She straightened her dress, lifted her head with a little flourish, and stepped smartly toward the window.

Then her face went miserable again and her steps slowed.

No, it couldn't be, and it won't be, she told herself. It had been just an illusion, a silly romantic dream that she had somehow projected out of her beauty-starved mind and given a moment's false reality. There couldn't be anything alive outside. There hadn't been for two whole years.

And if there conceivably were, it would be something altogether horrible. She remembered some of the pariahs--hairless, witless creatures, with radiation welts crawling over their bodies like worms, who had come begging for succor during the last months of the Terror--and been shot down. How they must have hated the people in refuges!

But even as she was thinking these things, her fingers were caressing the bolts, gingerly drawing them, and she was opening the shutters gently, apprehensively.

No, there couldn't be anything outside, she assured herself wryly, peering out into the green night. Even her fears had been groundless.

But the face came floating up toward the window. She started back in terror, then checked herself.

For the face wasn't horrible at all, only very thin, with full lips and large eyes and a thin proud nose like the jutting beak of a bird. And no radiation welts or scars marred the skin, olive in the tempered moonlight. It looked, in fact, just as it had when she had seen it the first time.

For a long moment the face stared deep, deep into her brain. Then the full lips smiled and a half-clenched, thin-fingered hand materialized itself from the green darkness and rapped twice on the grimy pane.

Her heart pounding, she furiously worked the little crank that opened the window. It came unstuck from the frame with a tiny explosion of dust and a zing like that of the watch, only louder. A moment later it swung open wide and a puff of incredibly fresh air caressed her face and the inside of her nostrils, stinging her eyes with unanticipated tears.

The man outside balanced on the sill, crouching like a faun, head high, one elbow on knee. He was dressed in scarred, snug trousers and an old sweater.

"Is it tears I get for a welcome?" he mocked her gently in a musical voice. "Or are those only to greet God's own breath, the air?"
He swung down inside and now she could see he was tall. Turning, he snapped his fingers and called, "Come, puss."

A black cat with a twisted stump of a tail and feet like small boxing gloves and ears almost as big as rabbits' hopped clumsily in view. He lifted it down, gave it a pat. Then, nodding familiarly to Effie, he unstrapped a little pack from his back and laid it on the table.

She couldn't move. She even found it hard to breathe.

"The window," she finally managed to get out.

He looked at her inquiringly, caught the direction of her stabbing finger. Moving without haste, he went over and closed it carelessly.

"The shutters, too," she told him, but he ignored that, looking around.

"It's a snug enough place you and your man have," he commented. "Or is it that this is a free-love town or a harem spot, or just a military post?" He checked her before she could answer. "But let's not be talking about such things now. Soon enough I'll be scared to death for both of us. Best enjoy the kick of meeting, which is always good for twenty minutes at the least." He smiled at her rather shyly. "Have you food? Good, then bring it."

She set cold meat and some precious canned bread before him and had water heating for coffee. Before he fell to, he shredded a chunk of meat and put it on the floor for the cat, which left off its sniffing inspection of the walls and ran up eagerly mewing. Then the man began to eat, chewing each mouthful slowly and appreciatively.

From across the table Effie watched him, drinking in his every deft movement, his every cryptic quirk of expression. She attended to making the coffee, but that took only a moment. Finally she could contain herself no longer.

"What's it like up there?" she asked breathlessly. "Outside, I mean."

He looked at her oddly for quite a space. Finally, he said flatly, "Oh, it's a wonderland for sure, more amazing than you tombed folk could ever imagine. A veritable fairyland." And he quickly went on eating.

"No, but really," she pressed.

Noting her eagerness, he smiled and his eyes filled with playful tenderness. "I mean it, on my oath," he assured her. "You think the bombs and the dust made only death and ugliness. That was true at first. But then, just as the doctors foretold, they changed the life in the seeds and loins that were brave enough to stay. Wonders bloomed and walked." He broke off suddenly and asked, "Do any of you ever venture outside?"

"A few of the men are allowed to," she told him, "for short trips in special protective suits, to hunt for canned food and fuels and batteries and things like that."

"Aye, and those blind-souled slugs would never see anything but what they're looking for," he said, nodding bitterly. "They'd never see the garden where a dozen buds blossom where one did before, and the flowers have petals a yard across, with stingless bees big as sparrows gently supping their nectar. Housecats grown spotted and huge as leopards (not little runts like Joe Louis here) stalk through those gardens. But they're gentle beasts, no more harmful than the rainbow-scaled snakes that glide around their paws, for the dust burned all the murder out of them, as it burned itself out."

"I've even made up a little poem about that. It starts, 'Fire can hurt me, or water, or the weight of Earth. But the dust is my friend.' Oh, yes, and then the robins like cockatoos and squirrels like a princess's ermine! All under a treasure chest of Sun and Moon and stars that the dust's magic powder changes from ruby to emerald and sapphire and amethyst back again. Oh, and then the new children--"

"You're telling the truth?" she interrupted him, her eyes brimming with tears. "You're not making it up?"

"I am not," he assured her solemnly. "And if you could catch a glimpse of one of the new children, you'd never doubt me again. They have long limbs as brown as this coffee would be if it had lots of fresh cream in it, and smiling delicate faces and the whitish teeth and the finest hair. They're so nimble that I--a sprightly man and somewhat enlivened by the dust--feel like a cripple beside them. And their thoughts dance like flames and make me feel a very imbecile."

"Of course, they have seven fingers on each hand and eight toes on each foot, but they're the more beautiful for that. They have large pointed ears that the Sun shines through. They play in the garden, all day long, slipping among the great leaves and blooms, but they're so swift that you can hardly see them, unless one chooses to stand still and look at you. For that matter, you have to look a bit hard for all these things I'm telling you."

"But it is true?" she pleaded.

"Every word of it," he said, looking straight into her eyes. He put down his knife and fork. "What's your name?" he asked softly. "Mine's Patrick."

"Effie," she told him.

He shook his head. "That can't be," he said. Then his face brightened. "Euphemia," he exclaimed. "That's what
Effie is short for. Your name is Euphemia." As he said that, looking at her, she suddenly felt beautiful. He got up and came around the table and stretched out his hand toward her.

"Euphemia--" he began.

"Yes?" she answered huskily, shrinking from him a little, but looking up sideways, and very flushed.

"Don't either of you move," Hank said.

The voice was flat and nasal because Hank was wearing a nose respirator that was just long enough to suggest an elephant's trunk. In his right hand was a large blue-black automatic pistol.

* * * * *

They turned their faces to him. Patrick's was abruptly alert, shifty. But Effie's was still smiling tenderly, as if Hank could not break the spell of the magic garden and should be pitied for not knowing about it.

"You little--" Hank began with an almost gleeful fury, calling her several shameful names. He spoke in short phrases, closing tight his unmasked mouth between them while he sucked in breath through the respirator. His voice rose in a crescendo. "And not with a man of the community, but a pariah! A pariah!"

"I hardly know what you're thinking, man, but you're quite wrong," Patrick took the opportunity to put in hurriedly, conciliatingly. "I just happened to be coming by hungry tonight, a lonely tramp, and knocked at the window. Your wife was a bit foolish and let kindheartedness get the better of prudence--"

"Don't think you've pulled the wool over my eyes, Effie," Hank went on with a screechy laugh, disregarding the other man completely. "Don't think I don't know why you're suddenly going to have a child after four long years."

At that moment the cat came nosing up to his feet. Patrick watched him narrowly, shifting his weight forward a little, but Hank only kicked the animal aside without taking his eyes off them.

"Even that business of carrying the wristwatch in your pocket instead of on your arm," he went on with channeled hysteria. "A neat bit of camouflage, Effie. Very neat. And telling me it was my child, when all the while you've been seeing him for months!"

"Man, you're mad; I've not touched her!" Patrick denied hotly though still calculatingly, and risked a step forward, stopping when the gun instantly swung his way.

"Pretending you were going to give me a healthy child," Hank raved on, "when all the while you knew it would be--either in body or germ plasm--a thing like that!"

He waved his gun at the malformed cat, which had leaped to the top of the table and was eating the remains of Patrick's food, though its watchful green eyes were fixed on Hank.

"I should shoot him down!" Hank yelled, between sobbing, chest-racking inhalations through the mask. "I should kill him this instant for the contaminated pariah he is!"

All this while Effie had not ceased to smile compassionately. Now she stood up without haste and went to Patrick's side. Disregarding his warning, apprehensive glance, she put her arm lightly around him and faced her husband.

"Then you'd be killing the bringer of the best news we've ever had," she said, and her voice was like a flood of some warm sweet liquor in that musty, hate-charged room. "Oh, Hank, forget your silly, wrong jealousy and listen to me. Patrick here has something wonderful to tell us."

* * * * *

Hank stared at her. For once he screamed no reply. It was obvious that he was seeing for the first time how beautiful she had become, and that the realization jolted him terribly.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked unevenly, almost fearfully.

"I mean that we no longer need to fear the dust," she said, and now her smile was radiant. "It never really did hurt people the way the doctors said it would. Remember how it was with me, Hank, the exposure I had and recovered from, although the doctors said I wouldn't at first--and without even losing my hair? Hank, those who were brave enough to stay outside, and who weren't killed by terror and suggestion and panic--they adapted to the dust. They changed, but they changed for the better. Everything--"

"Effie, he told you lies!" Hank interrupted, but still in that same agitated, broken voice, cowed by her beauty.

"Everything that grew or moved was purified," she went on ringingly. "You men going outside have never seen it, because you've never had eyes for it. You've been blinded to beauty, to life itself. And now all the power in the dust has gone and faded, anyway, burned itself out. That's true, isn't it?"

She smiled at Patrick for confirmation. His face was strangely veiled, as if he were calculating obscure changes. He might have given a little nod; at any rate, Effie assumed that he did, for she turned back to her husband.

"You see, Hank? We can all go out now. We need never fear the dust again. Patrick is a living proof of that," she continued triumphantly, standing straighter, holding him a little tighter. "Look at him. Not a scar or a sign, and he's been out in the dust for years. How could he be this way, if the dust hurt the brave? Oh, believe me, Hank! Believe what you see. Test it if you want. Test Patrick here."
"Effie, you're all mixed up. You don't know--" Hank faltered, but without conviction of any sort.

"Just test him," Effie repeated with utter confidence, ignoring--not even noticing--Patrick's warning nudge.

"All right," Hank mumbled. He looked at the stranger dully. "Can you count?" he asked.

Patrick's face was a complete enigma. Then he suddenly spoke, and his voice was like a fencer's foil--light, bright, alert, constantly playing, yet utterly on guard.

"Can I count? Do you take me for a complete simpleton, man? Of course I can count!"

"Then count yourself," Hank said, barely indicating the table.

"Count myself, should I?" the other retorted with a quick facetious laugh. "Is this a kindergarten? But if you want me to, I'm willing." His voice was rapid. "I've two arms, and two legs, that's four. And ten fingers and ten toes--you'll take my word for them?--that's twenty-four. A head, twenty-five. And two eyes and a nose and a mouth--"

"With this, I mean," Hank said heavily, advanced to the table, picked up the Geiger counter, switched it on, and handed it across the table to the other man.

But while it was still an arm's length from Patrick, the clicks began to mount furiously, until they were like the chatter of a pigmy machine gun. Abruptly the clicks slowed, but that was only the counter shifting to a new scaling circuit, in which each click stood for 512 of the old ones.

* * * * *

With those horrid, rattling little volleys, fear cascaded into the room and filled it, smashing like so much colored glass all the bright barriers of words Effie had raised against it. For no dreams can stand against the Geiger counter, the Twentieth Century's mouthpiece of ultimate truth. It was as if the dust and all the terrors of the dust had incarnated themselves in one dread invading shape that said in words stronger than audible speech, "Those were illusions, whistles in the dark. This is reality, the dreary, pitiless reality of the Burrowing Years."

Hank scuttled back to the wall. Through chattering teeth he babbled, "... enough radioactives ... kill a thousand men ... freak ... a freak ..." In his agitation he forgot for a moment to inhale through the respirator.

Even Effie--taken off guard, all the fears that had been drilled into her twanging like piano wires--shrank from the skeletal-seeming shape beside her, held herself to it only by desperation.

Patrick did it for her. He disengaged her arm and stepped briskly away. Then he whirled on them, smiling sardonically, and started to speak, but instead looked with distaste at the chattering Geiger counter he held between fingers and thumb.

"Have we listened to this racket long enough?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he put down the instrument on the table. The cat hurried over to it curiously and the clicks began again to mount in a minor crescendo. Effie lunged for it frantically, switched it off, darted back.

"That's right," Patrick said with another chilling smile. "You do well to cringe, for I'm death itself. Even in death I could kill you, like a snake." And with that his voice took on the tones of a circus Barker. "Yes, I'm a freak, as the gentleman so wisely said. That's what one doctor who dared talk with me for a minute told me before he kicked me out. He couldn't tell me why, but somehow the dust doesn't kill me. Because I'm a freak, you see, just like the men who ate nails and walked on fire and ate arsenic and stuck themselves through with pins. Step right up, ladies and gentlemen--only not too close!--and examine the man the dust can't harm. Rappaccini's child, brought up to date; his embrace, death!

"And now," he said, breathing heavily, "I'll get out and leave you in your damned lead cave."

He started toward the window. Hank's gun followed him shakily.

"Wait!" Effie called in an agonized voice. He obeyed. She continued falteringly, "When we were together earlier, you didn't act as if ..."

"When we were together earlier, I wanted what I wanted," he snarled at her. "You don't suppose I'm a bloody saint, do you?"

"And all the beautiful things you told me?"

"That," he said cruelly, "is just a line I've found that women fall for. They're all so bored and so starved for beauty--as they generally put it."

"Even the garden?" Her question was barely audible through the sobs that threatened to suffocate her.

He looked at her and perhaps his expression softened just a trifle.

"What's outside," he said, "is just a little worse than either of you can imagine." He tapped his temple.

"The garden's all here."

"You've killed it," she wept. "You've killed it in me. You've both killed everything that's beautiful. But you're worse," she screamed at Patrick, "because he only killed beauty once, but you brought it to life just so you could kill it again. Oh, I can't stand it! I won't stand it!" And she began to scream.

Patrick started toward her, but she broke off and whirled away from him to the window, her eyes crazy.

"You've been lying to us," she cried. "The garden's there. I know it is. But you don't want to share it with..."
"No, no, Euphemia," Patrick protested anxiously. "It's hell out there, believe me. I wouldn't lie to you about it."
"Wouldn't lie to me!" she mocked. "Are you afraid, too?"
With a sudden pull, she jerked open the window and stood before the blank green-tinged oblong of darkness that seemed to press into the room like a menacing, heavy, wind-urged curtain.
At that Hank cried out a shocked, pleading, "Effie!"
She ignored him. "I can't be cooped up here any longer," she said. "And I won't, now that I know. I'm going to the garden."
Both men sprang at her, but they were too late. She leaped lightly to the sill, and by the time they had flung themselves against it, her footsteps were already hurrying off into the darkness.
"Effie, come back! Come back!" Hank shouted after her desperately, no longer thinking to cringe from the man beside him, or how the gun was pointed. "I love you, Effie. Come back!"
Patrick added his voice. "Come back, Euphemia. You'll be safe if you come back right away. Come back to your home."
No answer to that at all.
They both strained their eyes through the greenish murk. They could barely make out a shadowy figure about half a block down the near-black canyon of the dismal, dust-blown street, into which the greenish moonlight hardly reached. It seemed to them that the figure was scooping something up from the pavement and letting it sift down along its arms and over its bosom.
"Go out and get her, man," Patrick urged the other. "For if I go out for her, I warn you I won't bring her back. She said something about having stood the dust better than most, and that's enough for me."
But Hank, chained by his painfully learned habits and by something else, could not move.
And then a ghostly voice came whispering down the street, chanting, "Fire can hurt me, or water, or the weight of Earth. But the dust is my friend."
Patrick spared the other man one more look. Then, without a word, he vaulted up and ran off.
Hank stood there. After perhaps a half minute he remembered to close his mouth when he inhaled. Finally he was sure the street was empty. As he started to close the window, there was a little mew.
He picked up the cat and gently put it outside. Then he did close the window, and the shutters, and bolted them, and took up the Geiger counter, and mechanically began to count himself.

Contents

THE NOTHING EQUATION
By TOM GODWIN

The cruiser vanished back into hyperspace and he was alone in the observation bubble, ten thousand light-years beyond the galaxy's outermost sun. He looked out the windows at the gigantic sea of emptiness around him and wondered again what the danger had been that had so terrified the men before him.

Of one thing he was already certain; he would find that nothing was waiting outside the bubble to kill him. The first bubble attendant had committed suicide and the second was a mindless maniac on the Earthbound cruiser but it must have been something inside the bubble that had caused it. Or else they had imagined it all.

He went across the small room, his magnetized soles loud on the thin metal floor in the bubble's silence. He sat down in the single chair, his weight very slight in the feeble artificial gravity, and reviewed the known facts.

The bubble was a project of Earth's Galactic Observation Bureau, positioned there to gather data from observations that could not be made from within the galaxy. Since metallic mass affected the hypersensitive instruments the bubble had been made as small and light as possible. It was for that reason that it could accommodate only one attendant.

The Bureau had selected Horne as the bubble's first attendant and the cruiser left him there for his six months' period of duty. When it made its scheduled return with his replacement he was found dead from a tremendous overdose of sleeping pills. On the table was his daily-report log and his last entry, made three months before:

I haven't attended to the instruments for a long time because it hates us and doesn't want us here. It hates me the most of all and keeps trying to get into the bubble to kill me. I can hear it whenever I stop and listen and I know it won't be long. I'm afraid of it and I want to be asleep when it comes. But I'll have to make it soon because I have only twenty sleeping pills left and if--
The sentence was never finished. According to the temperature recording instruments in the bubble his body ceased radiating heat that same night.

* * * * *

The bubble was cleaned, fumigated, and inspected inside and out. No sign of any inimical entity or force could be found.

Silverman was Horne's replacement. When the cruiser returned six months later bringing him, Green, to be Silverman's replacement, Silverman was completely insane. He babbled about something that had been waiting outside the bubble to kill him but his nearest to a rational statement was to say once, when asked for the hundredth time what he had seen:

"Nothing--you can't really see it. But you feel it watching you and you hear it trying to get in to kill you. One time I bumped the wall and--for God's sake--take me away from it--take me back to Earth ..."

Then he had tried to hide under the captain's desk and the ship's doctor had led him away.

The bubble was minutely examined again and the cruiser employed every detector device it possessed to search surrounding space for light-years in all directions. Nothing was found.

When it was time for the new replacement to be transferred to the bubble he reported to Captain McDowell.

"Everything is ready, Green," McDowell said. "You are the next one." His shaggy gray eyebrows met in a scowl. "It would be better if they would let me select the replacement instead of them."

He flushed with a touch of resentment and said, "The Bureau found my intelligence and initiative of thought satisfactory."

"I know--the characteristics you don't need. What they ought to have is somebody like one of my engine room roustabouts, too ignorant to get scared and too dumb to go nuts. Then we could get a sane report six months from now instead of the ravings of a maniac."

"I suggest," he said stiffly, "that you reserve judgement until that time comes, sir."

* * * * *

And that was all he knew about the danger, real or imaginary, that had driven two men into insanity. He would have six months in which to find the answer. Six months minus-- He looked at the chronometer and saw that twenty minutes had passed since he left the cruiser. Somehow, it seemed much longer ...

He moved to light a cigarette and his metal soles scraped the floor with the same startling loudness he had noticed before. The bubble was as silent as a tomb.

It was not much larger than a tomb; a sphere eighteen feet in diameter, made of thin sheet steel and criss-crossed outside with narrow reinforcing girders to keep the internal air pressure from rupturing it. The floor under him was six feet up from the sphere's bottom and the space beneath held the air regenerator and waste converter units, the storage batteries and the food cabinets. The compartment in which he sat contained chair, table, a narrow cot, banks of dials, a remote-control panel for operating the instruments mounted outside the hull, a microfilm projector, and a pair of exerciser springs attached to one wall. That was all.

There was no means of communication since a hyperspace communicator would have affected the delicate instruments with its radiations but there was a small microfilm library to go with the projector so that he should be able to pass away the time pleasantly enough.

But it was not the fear of boredom that was behind the apprehension he could already feel touching at his mind. It had not been boredom that had turned Horne into a suicide and Silverman into--

Something cracked sharply behind him, like a gunshot in the stillness, and he leaped to his feet, whirling to face it.

It was only a metal reel of data tape that had dropped out of the spectrum analyzer into the storage tray.

His heart was thumping fast and his attempt to laugh at his nervousness sounded hollow and mirthless. Something inside or outside the bubble had driven two men insane with its threat and now that he was irrevocably exiled in the bubble, himself, he could no longer dismiss their fear as products of their imagination. Both of them had been rational, intelligent men, as carefully selected by the Observation Bureau as he had been.

He set in to search the bubble, overlooking nothing. When he crawled down into the lower compartment he hesitated then opened the longest blade of his knife before searching among the dark recesses down there. He found nothing, not even a speck of dust.

Back in his chair again he began to doubt his first conviction. Perhaps there really had been some kind of an invisible force or entity outside the bubble. Both Horne and Silverman had said that "it" had tried to get in to kill them.

They had been very definite about that part.

* * * * *

There were six windows around the bubble's walls, set there to enable the attendant to see all the outside-
mounted instruments and dials. He went to them to look out, one by one, and from all of them he saw the same vast emptiness that surrounded him. The galaxy--his galaxy--was so far away that its stars were like dust. In the other directions the empty gulf was so wide that galaxies and clusters of galaxies were tiny, feeble specks of light shining across it.

All around him was a void so huge that galaxies were only specks in it....
Who could know what forces or dangers might be waiting out there?

A light blinked, reminding him it was time to attend to his duties. The job required an hour and he was nervous and not yet hungry when he had finished. He went to the exerciser springs on the wall and performed a work-out that left him tired and sweating but which, at least, gave him a small appetite.

The day passed, and the next. He made another search of the bubble's interior with the same results as before. He felt almost sure, then, that there was nothing in the bubble with him. He established a routine of work, pastime and sleep that made the first week pass fairly comfortably but for the gnawing worry in his mind that something invisible was lurking just outside the windows.

Then one day he accidentally kicked the wall with his metal shoe tip.

It made a sound like that from kicking a tight-stretched section of tin and it seemed to him it gave a little from the impact, as tin would do. He realized for the first time how thin it was--how deadly, dangerously thin.

According to the specifications he had read it was only one-sixteenth of an inch thick. It was as thin as cardboard.

He sat down with pencil and paper and began calculating. The bubble had a surface area of 146,500 square inches and the internal air pressure was fourteen pounds to the square inch. Which meant that the thin metal skin contained a total pressure of 2,051,000 pounds.

Two million pounds.
The bubble in which he sat was a bomb, waiting to explode the instant any section of the thin metal weakened.

It was supposed to be an alloy so extremely strong that it had a high safety factor but he could not believe that any metal so thin could be so strong. It was all right for engineers sitting safely on Earth to speak of high safety factors but his life depended upon the fragile wall not cracking. It made a lot of difference.

* * * * *
The next day he thought he felt the hook to which the exerciser spring was attached crack loose from where it was welded to the wall. He inspected the base of the hook closely and there seemed to be a fine, hairline fracture appearing around it.

* * * * *
He held his ear to it, listening for any sound of a leak. It was not leaking yet but it could commence doing so at any time. He looked out the windows at the illimitable void that was waiting to absorb his pitiful little supply of air and he thought of the days he had hauled and jerked at the springs with all his strength, not realizing the damage he was doing.

There was a sick feeling in his stomach for the rest of the day and he returned again and again to examine the hairline around the hook.

The next day he discovered an even more serious threat: the thin skin of the bubble had been spot-welded to the outside reinforcing girders.

Such welding often created hard, brittle spots that would soon crystallize from continued movement--and there was a slight temperature difference in the bubble between his working and sleeping hours that would daily produce a contraction and expansion of the skin. Especially when he used the little cooking burner.

He quit using the burner for any purpose and began a daily inspection of every square inch of the bubble's walls, marking with white chalk all the welding spots that appeared to be definitely weakened. Each day he found more to mark and soon the little white circles were scattered across the walls wherever he looked.

When he was not working at examining the walls he could feel the windows watching him, like staring eyes. Out of self defense he would have to go to them and stare back at the emptiness.

Space was alien; coldly, deadly, alien. He was a tiny spark of life in a hostile sea of Nothing and there was no one to help him. The Nothing outside was waiting day and night for the most infinitesimal leak or crack in the walls; the Nothing that had been waiting out there since time without beginning and would wait for time without end.

Sometimes he would touch his finger to the wall and think, Death is out there, only one-sixteenth of an inch away. His first fears became a black and terrible conviction: the bubble could not continue to resist the attack for long. It had already lasted longer than it should have. Two million pounds of pressure wanted out and all the sucking Nothing of intergalactic space wanted in. And only a thin skin of metal, rotten with brittle welding spots, stood between them.

It wanted in--the Nothing wanted in. He knew, then, that Horne and Silverman had not been insane. It wanted
in and someday it would get in. When it did it would explode him and jerk out his guts and lungs. Not until that happened, not until the Nothing filled the bubble and enclosed his hideous, turned-inside-out body would it ever be content ...

* * * * *

He had long since quit wearing the magnetized shoes, afraid the vibration of them would weaken the bubble still more. And he began noticing sections where the bubble did not seem to be perfectly concave, as though the rolling mill had pressed the metal too thin in places and it was swelling out like an over-inflated balloon.

He could not remember when he had last attended to the instruments. Nothing was important but the danger that surrounded him. He knew the danger was rapidly increasing because whenever he pressed his ear to the wall he could hear the almost inaudible tickings and vibrations as the bubble's skin contracted or expanded and the Nothing tapped and searched with its empty fingers for a flaw or crack that it could tear into a leak.

But the windows were far the worst, with the Nothing staring in at him day and night. There was no escape from it. He could feel it watching him, malignant and gloating, even when he hid his eyes in his hands.

The time came when he could stand it no longer. The cot had a blanket and he used that together with all his spare clothes to make a tent stretching from the table to the first instrument panel. When he crawled under it he found that the lower half of one window could still see him. He used the clothes he was wearing to finish the job and it was much better then, hiding there in the concealing darkness where the Nothing could not see him.

He did not mind going naked—the temperature regulators in the bubble never let it get too cold.

He had no conception of time from then on. He emerged only when necessary to bring more food into his tent. He could still hear the Nothing tapping and sucking in its ceaseless search for a flaw and he made such emergences as brief as possible, wishing that he did not have to come out at all. Maybe if he could hide in his tent for a long time and never make a sound it would get tired and go away ...

Sometimes he thought of the cruiser and wished they would come for him but most of the time he thought of the thing that was outside, trying to get in to kill him. When the strain became too great he would draw himself up in the position he had once occupied in his mother's womb and pretend he had never left Earth. It was easier there.

But always, before very long, the bubble would tick or whisper and he would freeze in terror, thinking, This time it's coming in ...

* * * * *

Then one day, suddenly, two men were peering under his tent at him.

One of them said, "My God--again!" and he wondered what he meant. But they were very nice to him and helped him put on his clothes. Later, in the cruiser, everything was hazy and they kept asking him what he was afraid of.

"What was it--what did you find?"
He tried hard to think so he could explain it. "It was--it was Nothing."
"What were you and Horne and Silverman afraid of--what was it?" the voice demanded insistently.
"I told you," he said. "Nothing."
They stared at him and the haziness cleared a little as he saw they did not understand. He wanted them to believe him because what he told them was so very true.
"It wanted to kill us. Please--can't you believe me? It was waiting outside the bubble to kill us."
But they kept staring and he knew they didn't believe him. They didn't want to believe him ...

Everything turned hazy again and he started to cry. He was glad when the doctor took his hand to lead him away ...

The bubble was carefully inspected, inside and out, and nothing was found. When it was time for Green's replacement to be transferred to it Larkin reported to Captain McDowell.

"Everything is ready, Larkin," McDowell said. "You're the next one. I wish we knew what the danger is." He scowled. "I still think one of my roustabouts from the engine room might give us a sane report six months from now instead of the babblings we'll get from you."

He felt his face flush and he said stiffly, "I suggest, sir, that you not jump to conclusions until that time comes."

* * * * *

The cruiser vanished back into hyperspace and he was alone inside the observation bubble, ten thousand light-years beyond the galaxy's outermost sun. He looked out the windows at the gigantic sea of emptiness around him and wondered again what the danger had been that had so terrified the men before him.

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THE END
There were papers on the desk, a litter of papers scrawled over, in the careless writing of indifferent students, with the symbols of chemistry and long mathematical computations. The man at the desk pushed them aside to rest his lean, lined face on one thin hand. The other arm, ending at the wrist, was on the desk before him.

Students of a great university had long since ceased to speculate about the missing hand. The result of an experiment, they knew--a hand that was a miss of lifeless cells, amputated quickly that the living arm might be saved--but that was some several years ago, ancient history to those who came and went through Professor Eddinger's class room.

And now Professor Eddinger was weary--weary and old, he told himself--as he closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the interminable papers and the stubby wrist that had ended forever his experiments and the delicate manipulations which only he could do.

He reached slowly for a buzzing phone, but his eyes brightened at the voice that came to him.

"I've got it--I've got it!" The words were almost incoherent. "This is Avery, Professor--Avery! You must come at once. You will share in it; I owe it all to you ... you will be the first to see ... I am sending a taxi for you--"

Professor Eddinger's tired eyes crinkled to a smile. Enthusiasm like this was rare among his youngsters. But Avery--with the face of a poet, a dreamer's eyes and the mind of a scientist--good boy, Avery!--a long time since he had seen him--had him in his own laboratory for two years....

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"No--no!" said a voice; "I can't tell you--it is too big--greater than the induction motor--greater than the electric light--it is the greatest thing in the world. The taxi should be there now--you must come--"

A knock at the office door where a voice said, "Car for Professor Eddinger," confirmed the excited words.

"I'll come," said the Professor, "right away."

He pondered, as the car whirled him across the city, on what this greatest thing in the world might be. And he hoped with gentle skepticism that the enthusiasm was warranted. A young man opened the car door as they stopped. His face was flushed, Eddinger noted, hair pushed back in disarray, his shirt torn open at the throat.

"Wait here," he told the driver and took the Professor by the arm to hurry him into a dilapidated building.

"Not much of a laboratory," he said, "but we'll have better, you and I; we'll have better--"

The room seemed bare with its meager equipment, but it was neat, as became the best student of Professor Eddinger. Rows of reagent bottles stood on the shelves, but the tables were a litter of misplaced instruments and broken glassware where trembling hands had fumbled in heedless excitement.

"Glad to see you again, Avery." The gentle voice of Professor Eddinger had lost its tired tone. "It's been two years you've been working, I judge. Now what is this great discovery, boy? What have you found?"

The younger man, in whose face the color came and went, and whose eyes were shining from dark hollows that marked long days and sleepless nights, still clung to the other's arm.

"It's real," he said; "it's great! It means fortune and fame, and you're in on that, Professor. The old master," he said and clapped a hand affectionately upon a thin shoulder; "I owe it all to you. And now I have--I have learned.... No, you shall see for yourself. Wait--"

He crossed quickly to a table. On it was an apparatus; the eyes of the older man widened as he saw it. It was intricate--a maze of tubing. There was a glass bulb above--the generator of a cathode ray, obviously--and electromagnets below and on each side. Beneath was a crude sphere of heavy lead--a retort, it might be--and from this there passed two massive, insulated cables. The understanding eyes of the Professor followed them, one to a terminal on a great insulating block upon the floor, the other to a similarly protected terminal of carbon some feet above it in the air.

The trembling fingers of the young man made some few adjustments, then he left the instrument to take his place by an electric switch. "Stand back," he warned, and closed the switch.

There was a gentle hissing from within glass tubes, the faint glow of a blue-green light. And that was all, until--with a crash like the ripping crackle of lightning, a white flame arced between the terminals of the heavy cables. It hissed ceaselessly through the air where now the tang of ozone was apparent. The carbon blocks glowed with a brilliant incandescence when the flame ceased with the motion of a hand where Avery pulled a switch.
The man's voice was quiet now. "You do not know, yet, what you have seen, but there was a tremendous potential there--an amperage I can't measure with my limited facilities." He waved a deprecating hand about the ill-furnished laboratory. "But you have seen--" His voice trembled and failed at the forming of the words.

"--The disintegration of the atom," said Professor Eddinger quietly, "and the release of power unlimited. Did you use thorium?" he inquired.

The other looked at him in amazement. Then: "I should have known you would understand," he said humbly.

"And you know what it means"--again his voice rose--"power without end to do the work of the world--great vessels driven a lifetime on a mere ounce of matter--a revolution in transportation--in living--" He paused. "The liberation of mankind," he added, and his voice was reverent. "This will do the work of the world: it will make a new heaven and a new earth! Oh, I have dreamed dreams," he exclaimed, "I have seen visions. And it has been given to me--me!--to liberate man from the curse of Adam ... the sweat of his brow.... I can't realize it even yet. I--I am not worthy...."

* * * * *

He raised his eyes slowly in the silence to gaze in wondering astonishment at the older man. There was no answering light, no exaltation on the lined face. Only sadness in the tired eyes that looked at him and through him as if focused upon something in a dim future--or past.

"Don't you see?" asked the wondering man. "The freedom of men--the liberation of a race. No more poverty, no endless, grinding labor." His young eyes, too, were looking into the future, a future of blinding light. "Culture," he said, "instead of heart-breaking toil, a chance to grow mentally, spiritually; it is another world, a new life--" And again he asked: "Surely, you see?"

"I see," said the other; "I see--plainly."

"The new world," said Avery. "It--it dazzles me; it rings like music in my ears."

"I see no new world," was the slow response.

The young face was plainly perplexed. "Don't you believe?" he stammered. "After you have seen ... I thought you would have the vision, would help me emancipate the world, save it--" His voice failed.

"Men have a way of crucifying their saviors," said the tired voice.

The inventor was suddenly indignant. "You are blind," he said harshly; "it is too big for you. And I would have had you stand beside me in the great work.... I shall announce it alone.... There will be laboratories--enormous!--and factories. My invention will be perfected, simplified, compressed. A generator will be made--thousands of horsepower to do the work of a city, free thousands of men--made so small you can hold it in one hand."

The sensitive face was proudly alight, proud and a trifle arrogant. The exaltation of his coming power was strong upon him.

"Yes," said Professor Eddinger, "in one hand." And he raised his right arm that he might see where the end of a sleeve was empty.

"I am sorry," said the inventor abruptly; "I didn't mean ... but you will excuse me now; there is so much to be done--" But the thin figure of Professor Eddinger had crossed to the far table to examine the apparatus there.

"Crude," he said beneath his breath, "crude--but efficient!"

* * * * *

In the silence a rat had appeared in the distant corner. The Professor nodded as he saw it. The animal stopped as the man's eyes came upon it; then sat squirrel-like on one of the shelves as it ate a crumb of food. Some morsel from a hurried lunch of Avery's, the Professor reflected--poor Avery! Yes, there was much to be done.

He spoke as much to himself as to the man who was now beside him. "It enters here," he said and peered downward toward the lead bulb. He placed a finger on the side of the metal. "About here, I should think.... Have you a drill? And a bit of quartz?"

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The inventor's eyes were puzzled, but the assurance of his old instructor claimed obedience. He produced a small drill and a fragment like broken glass. And he started visibly as the one hand worked awkwardly to make a small hole in the side of the lead. But he withdrew his own restraining hand, and he watched in mystified silence while the quartz was fitted to make a tiny window and the thin figure stooped to sight as if aiming the opening toward a far corner where a brown rat sat upright in earnest munching of a dry crust.

The Professor drew Avery with him as he retreated noiselessly from the instrument. "Will you close the switch," he whispered.

The young man hesitated, bewildered, at this unexpected demonstration, and the Professor himself reached with his one hand for the black lever. Again the arc crashed into life, to hold for a brief instant until Professor Eddinger opened the switch.

"Well," demanded Avery, "what's all the show? Do you think you are teaching me anything--about my own instrument?" There was hurt pride and jealous resentment in his voice.
"See," said Professor Eddinger quietly. And his one thin hand pointed to a far shelf, where, in the shadow, was a huddle of brown fur and a bit of crust. It fell as they watched, and the "plop" of the soft body upon the floor sounded loud in the silent room.

"The law of compensation," said Professor Eddinger. "Two sides to the medal! Darkness and light--good and evil--life ... and death!"

* * * * *

The young man was stammering. "What do you mean?--a death ray evolved?" And: "What of it?" he demanded; "what of it? What's that got to do with it?"

"A death ray," the other agreed. "You have dreamed, Avery--one must in order to create--but it is only a dream. You dreamed of life--a fuller life--for the world, but you would have given them, as you have just seen, death."

The face of Avery was white as wax; his eyes glared savagely from dark hollows.

"A rat!" he protested. "You have killed a rat ... and you say--you say--" He raised one trembling hand to his lips to hold them from forming the unspeakable words.

"A rat," said the Professor--"or a man ... or a million men."

"We will control it."

"All men will have it--the best and the worst ... and there is no defence."

"It will free the world--"

"It will destroy it."

"No!"--and the white-faced man was shouting now--"you don't understand--you can't see--"

The lean figure of the scientist straightened to its full height. His eyes met those of the younger man, silent now before him, but Avery knew the eyes never saw him; they were looking far off, following the wings of thought. In the stillness the man's words came harsh and commanding--

"Do you see the cities," he said, "crumbling to ruins under the cold stars? The fields? They are rank with wild growth, torn and gullied by the waters; a desolate land where animals prowl. And the people--the people!--wandering bands, lower, as the years drag on, than the beasts themselves; the children dying, forgotten, in the forgotten lands; a people to whom the progress of our civilization is one with the ages past, for whom there is again the slow, toiling road toward the light.

"And somewhere, perhaps, a conquering race, the most brutal and callous of mankind, rioting in their sense of power and dragging themselves down to oblivion...."

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His gaze came slowly back to the room and the figure of the man still fighting for his dream.

"They would not," said Avery hoarsely; "they'd use it for good."

"Would they?" asked Professor Eddinger. He spoke simply as one stating simple facts. "I love my fellow men," he said, "and I killed them in thousands in the last war--I, and my science, and my poison gas."

The figure of Avery slumped suddenly upon a chair; his face was buried in his hands. "And I would have been," he groaned, "the greatest man in the world."

"You shall be greater," said the Professor, "though only we shall know it--you and I.... You will save the world--from itself."

The figure, bowed and sunken in the chair, made no move; the man was heedless of the kindly hand upon his shoulder. His voice, when he spoke, was that of one afar off, speaking out of a great loneliness. "You don't understand," he said dully; "you can't--"

But Professor Eddinger, a cog in the wheels of a great educational machine, glanced at the watch on his wrist. Again his thin shoulders were stooped, his voice tired. "My classes," he said. "I must be going...."

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In the gathering dusk Professor Eddinger locked carefully the door of his office. He crossed beyond his desk and fumbled with his one hand for his keys.

There was a cabinet to be opened, and he stared long in the dim light at the object he withdrew. He looked approvingly at the exquisite workmanship of an instrument where a generator of the cathode ray and an intricate maze of tubing surmounted electro-magnets and a round lead bulb. There were terminals for attaching heavy cables; it was a beautiful thing.... His useless arm moved to bring an imaginary hand before the window of quartz in the lead sphere.

"Power," he whispered and repeated Avery's words; "power, to build a city--or destroy a civilization ... and I hold it in one hand."

He replaced the apparatus in the safety of its case. "The saviors of mankind!" he said, and his tone was harsh and bitter.

But a smile, whimsical, kindly, crinkled his tired eyes as he turned to his desk and its usual litter of examination
"It is something, Avery," he whispered to that distant man, "to belong in so distinguished a group."

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**THE RADIANT SHELL**

By Paul Ernst

"And that, gentlemen," said the Secretary of War, "is the situation. Arvania has stolen the Ziegler plans and formulae. With their acquisition it becomes the most powerful nation on earth. The Ziegler plans are at present in the Arvanian Embassy, but they will be smuggled out of the country soon. Within a month of their landing in Arvania, war will be declared against us. That means"--he glanced at the tense faces around the conference table--"that we have about three months to live as a nation--unless we can get those plans!"

There was a hushed, appalled silence, broken at last by General Forsyte.

"Nonsense! How can a postage-stamp country like Arvania really threaten us?"

"The day has passed, General," said the Secretary, "when a nation's power is reckoned by its size. The Ziegler heat ray is the deadliest weapon yet invented. A thousand men with a dozen of the ray-projectors can reduce us to smoking ruins while remaining far outside the range of our guns. No! I tell you that declaration of war by Arvania will be followed by the downfall of the United States inside of three months!"

Again the hushed, strained silence descended over the conference table, while one white-faced man gazed at another and all speculated on the incredible possibility of a world in which there was no United States of America.

"We must get the plans," nodded Forsyte, convinced at last. "But how? March openly on the Arvanian Embassy?"

"No, that would be declaration of war on our part. The World Court, which knows nothing of the Ziegler plans, would set the League at our throats."

"Send volunteers unofficially to raid the place?"

"Impossible. There is a heavy guard in the Arvanian Embassy; and I more than suspect the place bristles with machine guns."

"What are we to do?" demanded Forsyte.

The Secretary seemed to have been waiting for that final question.

"I have had an odd and desperate plan submitted me from an outside source. I could not pass it without your approval. I will let you hear it from the lips of the planner."

He pressed a buzzer. "Bring Mr. Winter in," he told his secretary.

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The man who presently appeared in the doorway was an arresting figure. A man of thirty-odd with the body of an athlete, belied somewhat by the pallor of an indoor worker, with acid stained, delicate hands offset by forearms that might have belonged to a blacksmith, with coal black hair and gray eyes so light as to look like ice-gray holes in the deep caverns of his eye-sockets. This was Thorn Winter.

"Gentlemen, the scientist, Mr. Winter," announced the Secretary. "He thinks he can get the Ziegler plans."

Thorn Winter cleared his throat. "My scheme is simple enough," he said tersely. "I believe I can walk right into the Embassy, get the plans--and then walk right out again. It sounds kind of impossible, but I think I can work it by making myself invisible."

"Invisible?" echoed Forsyte. "Invisible!"

"Precisely," said Thorn in a matter-of-fact tone. "I have just turned out a camouflage which is the most perfect yet discovered. It was designed for application to guns and equipment only. I'd never thought of trying to cover a human body with it, but I am sure it can be done."

"But ... invisible ..." muttered Forsyte, glancing askance at Winter.

"There's no time for argument," said the Secretary crisply. "The question is, shall we give this man permission to try the apparently impossible?"

All heads nodded, though in all eyes was doubt. The Secretary turned to the scientist.

"You are aware of the risk you run? You realize that if you are caught, we cannot recognize you--that we must disclaim official knowledge of your work, and leave you to your fate?"

Thorn nodded.

"Then," said the Secretary, his voice vibrant, "yours is the mission. And on your effort hangs the fate of your
country. Now—what help will you require?"

"Only the assistance of one man," said Thorn. "And, since secrecy is vital, I'm going to ask you, sir, to be that man."

The Secretary smiled; and with that smile he seemed to be transformed from a great leader of affairs into a kindly, human individual. "I am honored, Mr. Winter," he said. "Shall we go at once to your laboratory?"

In the great laboratory room, the Secretary glanced about almost uneasily at the crowding apparatus that was such an enigma to one untrained in science. Then his gaze returned to Winter's activities.

Thorn was carefully stirring fluids, poured drop by drop from various retorts, in a mixing bowl. All the fluids were colorless; and they combined in a mixture that had approximately the consistency of thin syrup. To this, Thorn added a carefully weighted pinch of glittering powder. Then he lit a burner under the bowl, and thrust into the mixture a tiny, specially constructed thermometer.

"You can really make yourself invisible?" breathed the Secretary.

"I can," said Thorn, "if the blisters don't upset my calculations by making my body surfaces too moist for this stuff to stick to. I'm going to have you paint me with it, you see, and it was never intended to cover flesh."

He regulated the burner anxiously, and then began to take off his clothes.

"Ready," he said at last, glancing at the thermometer and turning off the burner. He stood before the wondering Secretary, a fine, muscular figure. "Take this brush and cover me with the stuff. And be sure not to miss any of me!"

And then the Secretary saw why Thorn had said the colorless paint was never intended to be applied to human flesh. For it was still seething and smoking in the cauldron.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Don't you want to wait till it cools a little?"

"Can't," said Thorn. "It has to be applied hot or it loses its flexibility."

The Secretary dipped the brush and began to paint the naked flesh of the scientist. Not a quiver touched that flesh as an almost microscopically thin, colorless layer formed into a film after the brush strokes. But the Secretary's fingers shook a little.

"My God, man!" he said finally. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's a little like being boiled in oil," replied Thorn grimly. "Outside of that it's all right. Hurry, before the stuff gets too cool."

The clinging thin shell covered him to his chest, then to his throat. At that point he reached into a drawer in a workbench beside him and drew out two small, hollow hemispheres of glass. These he cupped over his eyes.

"What are those for?" asked the Secretary.

"So my eyes can be covered with the film. If they weren't, I'd present the somewhat remarkable spectacle of a pair of disembodied eyes walking down the street."

Painfully, agonizingly, the hot film was applied to throat and face; over the glass spheres that cupped around the eyes; over a tight leather cap covering the scientist's hair; and over a sort of football nose-guard which extended down an inch below the end of Thorn's nose in a sort of overhanging offset that would allow him to breathe and still keep his nostrils hidden. The Secretary stepped back.

Before him stood a figure that looked not unlike a glazed statue of a man. The effect was that of a body encased in clear ice--and like clear ice, the encasing shell sparkled and glittered radiantly in the sunlight that poured in at the windows.

Thorn moved. His glazed arms and legs and torso glistened with all the colors in the spectrum; while under the filmed bulges of glass his eyes looked as large as apples. The Secretary felt a chill of superstitious fear as he gazed at that weird and glittering figure with its enormous glazed eyes.

"But you aren't invisible," he said at length.

"That comes now," said Thorn, walking ahead of the Secretary while on the ceiling above him danced red and yellow and blue rainbows of refracted light.

He stepped onto a big metal plate. Suspended above was a huge metal ring, with its hole directly over the spot on which he stood.

"Soft magnets," explained Thorn. "As simply as I can put it, my process for rendering an object invisible is this: I place the object, coated with the film, on this plate. Then I start in motion the overhead ring, creating an immensely powerful, rapidly rotating magnetic field. The rotating field rearranges the atoms of this peculiarly susceptible film of mine so that they will transmit light rays with the least possible resistance. It combs the atoms into straight lines, you might say. With that straight-line, least-resistance arrangement comes invisibility."

"I don't quite see--" began the Secretary.
"Refraction of light," said Thorn hurriedly. "The light rays strike this film, hurtle around the object, it coats—at increased speed, probably, but there are no instruments accurate enough to check that—and emerge on the other side. Thus, you can look at a body so filmed, and not see it: your gaze travels around it and rests on objects in a straight line behind it. But you'll see for yourself in a moment. Pull that switch, there, will you? And leave it on for two full minutes after you have ceased to see me."

Straight and tall, a figure encased in shimmering crystal, the scientist stood on the metal plate. Hesitant, with the superstitious dread growing in his heart, the Secretary stood with his hand on the switch. That hand pulled the switch down.... Soundlessly the overhead metal ring began to whirl, gathering speed with every second. And then, though he had known in advance something of what was coming, the Secretary could not suppress a shout of surprise.

The man before him on the metal plate was vanishing.

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Slowly he disappeared from view—slowly, as an object sinking deeper and deeper into clear water disappears. Now the face was but a white blob. Now the entire body was but a misty blur. And now a shade, a wavering shadow, alone marked Winter's presence.

The Secretary could not have told the exact instant when that last faint blur oozed from sight. He only knew that at one second he was gazing at it—and at the next second his eyes rested on a rack of test-tubes on the wall beyond the plate.

He looked at his watch. Sweat glistened in tiny points on the hand that held the switch. It was all so like death, this disappearance—as if he had thrown the switch that electrocuted a man.

The specified two minutes passed. He cut off the power. The great ring lost speed, stopped whirling. And on the plate was—nothing.

At least it seemed there was nothing. But a moment later a deep voice sounded out: "I guess I'm invisible, all right, according to the expression on your face."

"You are," said the Secretary, mopping his forehead, "except when you speak. Then I have the bizarre experience of seeing glimpses of teeth, tongue and throat hanging in mid-air. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't witnessed it myself! That paint of yours is miraculous!"

"A little complicated, but hardly miraculous. It has a cellulose base, and there is in it a small per cent of powdered crystal—but the rest I'll keep locked in my brain alone till my country has need of it."

The glimpses of teeth and tongue and throat ceased. In spite of himself, the Secretary started as an unseen hand touched his shoulder.

"Now,"—there was ringing resolution in the deep voice—"for the Arvanian Embassy. Please drive me there—and be as quick as you can about it. I can't last very long with this film sealing most of the pores of my body."

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The Secretary started for the laboratory door. Beside him sounded the patter of bare feet. He opened the door and walked into the hallway. Behind him, apparently of itself, the door clicked shut; and the footsteps again sounded beside him.

The Secretary walked to the curb where his limousine waited. His chauffeur jumped out and opened the door. The Secretary paused a moment, one foot on the running board, to draw a cigar from his pocket and light it. During that moment the car pressed down on that side, and as suddenly rocked back up again.

The chauffeur stared wide-eyed at his employer.

"Did you do that, sir?" he asked.

"Do what?" said the Secretary.

"Push down on the running board with your foot."

"Of course not," said the Secretary, his eyebrows raising. "You could have seen my leg move if I had. But why do you ask?"

"It felt like somebody got into this car," mumbled the man.

"Did you see anybody get in?" said the Secretary with a shrug. And, shaking his head, with a fuddled look in his eyes, the chauffeur turned away and got into the driver's seat.

The Secretary glanced at the rear seat. On the far side, the cushion was heavily depressed. He sat on the near side, feeling his knee strike another, unseen knee.

"Drive to the Bulgarian Embassy," he told his man.

Up Sixteenth Street the car swung, past the various embassies which looked more like palatial private villas than offices of foreign nations. Toward the end of the line, a smaller building than most of the others, was the Arvanian Embassy. Next to it was the Bulgarian.

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The car stopped in front of the Bulgarian Embassy, and the Secretary got out. Again he paused, while the chauffeur held the door open, to hold a match to his cigar. Again the car sagged down on that side, and slowly swayed up again.

"Hey--" said the chauffeur. But meeting the Secretary's calmly inquiring gaze, he stopped. Scratching his head, he went back to the wheel, while the Secretary walked toward the building entrance.

Behind him, moving on soundless bare feet along the sidewalk, Thorn Winter hastened, cloaked in invisibility, toward the Arvanian Embassy--and the plans that spelled America's destruction if they remained in Arvanian hands.

The embassy building was a three-storied oblong house of white stone topping a terrace that started its climb from the sidewalk of Sixteenth Street. The doors at the head of the wide stone staircase were of bronze; and they were closed, and, Thorn surmised, efficiently barred. The windows at front and sides were also closed, in spite of the warmth of the sunny spring afternoon.

Beside the building, leading up in a short steep hill, was the driveway. Up this Thorn started. The front of the house was hopelessly barred; but at the rear entrance there might be a chance.

Up the driveway, then, he walked, a little startled at the fact that he cast no shadow--feeling as a ghost might feel. The pavement was hot to his thinly filmed feet. A little dubious as to the effect of heat on the vital shell that hid him, he stepped off into the cool grass beside the drive; and came soon to the rear of the embassy.

There was no porch or veranda, simply two stone steps leading up to a stout oak door which opened onto the embassy kitchens. From behind this door came the sound of crockery and the hum of voices. The Arvanian chef evidently was preparing afternoon tea.

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Walking boldly to the very steps, Thorn began the vigil that should end when someone came in or out of that door, allowing him to slip inside the building before the portal was barred shut again.

For nearly half an hour Thorn stood there before something happened that at once helped him, and, at the same time, nearly proved his undoing.

A light delivery van sped up the driveway. The wheels stirred up a cloud of dust. It was a very small cloud of very fine dust. Thorn at first thought nothing of it, because he was so engrossed in the conviction that here ought to be provided an entrance into the house.

The truck driver got out, took a crate from the body of the van, and went with it to the back door. After a moment of waiting, the door opened. Thorn noticed that it was opened very cautiously, only an inch or so. He caught a glimpse of a heavy chain stretched across the inch opening, and saw a strip of bearded, resolute face.

The door was unchained. The driver walked in, while the door stood open. Thorn started to glide in after him....

Mere chance made him glance at a window near the door. This window framed another bearded, resolute face. And the eyes in that face were like saucers as they stared full at Thorn!

For an instant Thorn knew icy fear. His invisibility! Had something happened to strip him of that concealing mantle? But what could have happened?

He glanced down at himself and saw the reason for the guard's saucer-eyed expression.

A little of the light cloud of dust stirred up by the truck wheels had settled over him and clung to the encasing shell. As he moved, these dust specks moved. The effect to the staring guard, Thorn realized, must be that of seeing a queer, fine dust column moving eccentrically over a grassy lawn where no dust column had any business to be.

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Quickly Thorn moved toward the garage, with the eyes of the amazed guard following him. The scientist was savage at the delay; but it was vital that he rid himself of that clinging dust.

Behind the garage he broke off a feathery spray from a vine, and stroked it lightly over himself. That, too, presented a curious spectacle: a leafy branch suddenly detaching itself from the parent vine and dancing here and there in mid-air.

When the all-important task was done, Thorn raced back to the rear doorway. By great good luck it was still open. He stole in, just making it as the truck driver, staggering under a load of empty crates, came up the cellar stairs and went out to his truck.

Thorn drew a deep breath. He was inside the Arvanian Embassy. The place was a three-storied stone trap in which, if the slightest slip revealed him to its tenants, he would surely meet his death. But, anyway, he was inside! And the threatening Ziegler plans waited somewhere near at hand for him to find and take!

Even had Thorn not known in advance that trouble was brewing, he could have surmised that something sinister was being hatched in the Arvanian Embassy. For, in this big sunny kitchen five men lounged about in addition to the white-coated chef and his beardless striping of an assistant. And each of the five had a holster strapped openly over his coat with the butt of an automatic protruding in plain sight.

Thorn looked about. Across from the great range, beside which he was standing and holding his breath for fear
some one of the seven men should become aware of his presence, was the door leading to the front part of the house. He started toward that door, walking on tiptoe. A shudder crept up his spine as he tiptoed across the floor directly in front of the armed guards who would have shot him down without compunction could they have seen him. He was not yet used to his invisibility; knowing himself to be substantial, feeling his feet descend solidly on the floor, he still could hardly credit the fact that human eyes could not observe him.

He got to the door. He put out his hand to open it, then realized just in time that he could not do that. A door stealthily opening and closing again, with no apparent hand to manipulate it? Such a spectacle would start a riot!

In a frenzy of impatience, he stood beside the door, waiting till someone else should swing it open. And in a moment it chanced that the stripling assistant chef came toward him with a tray. The boy pushed the swinging door with his foot, and walked into the butler's pantry. After him, treading almost on the lad's heels, came Thorn.

The boy sat the tray down, and turned to reach into an upper shelf. The space in the pantry was constricted, and he turned abruptly. The result was that he suddenly drew back as though a hot iron had seared him, and went white as chalk. Then he dashed back into the kitchen.

"A hand!" Thorn heard him gibbering in Arvanian. "A hand! I touched it with mine! Something horrible is in there!"

With his heart pounding in his throat, Thorn leaned close to the swing-door to hear what happened next. Would there be a rush for the butler's pantry? An investigation? He eyed the farther door--the dining room door. But he dared not flee through that save as a last resort. In the dining room sounded voices; and again the sight of a door opening and closing of itself would lead to uproar.

"A hand?" he heard one of the guards say in the kitchen. "An unseen hand? Thou art empty in the head, young Gova."

There followed some jeering sentences in colloquial Arvanian that were too idiomatic for Thorn's knowledge of the language to let him understand. A general guffaw came from the rest; and, as no move was made toward the pantry, Thorn decided he was saved for another few moments.

Gasping, he raised his hand to wipe the perspiration off his forehead, then realized there was no perspiration there. His film-clogged pores could exude nothing; he had only the sensation of perspiring.

Now the problem was to get through the next door. Thoughtfully, Thorn gazed at it. He saw that this, too, was a swing-door. Further, he saw that now and then it creaked open a few inches, and swung sluggishly back. Beyond it somewhere a window was open, and spasmodic gusts moved the swinging slab of wood.

The next time the door moved with the wind, Thorn caught it and augmented the movement a bit. Twice he did that, each time swinging it back a trifle further. Next time, he figured, he could open it enough to slide into the room.

Two glimpses he had had, with the openings of the door, into the room beyond. These glimpses had showed him a great oval table on which was set the debris of afternoon tea, and around which were grouped tense, eager men. Dark of hair and complexion were these men, with the arrogant hawk noses and ruthless small eyes of the typical Arvanian. Several of them were garbed in military uniforms and armed with swords. They were talking in tones too low for Thorn to distinguish words through the film over his ears. He would have to get in there to hear them.

For the third time the wind pushed at the door. For the third time Thorn caught its edge and swung it--six inches, eight, almost enough to slip through....

"Shut thou the window!" crackled a voice suddenly. "Fool! What if some of these documents blew away?"

There was a slam, and the breeze was cut off. Thorn quickly let go of the door, and watched it fall back in place again.

He was cursing his luck when he heard the same commanding voice say: "Kori, see if there be one who listens in the butler's pantry. It seemed the door opened wider than the wind would warrant."

There was the scrape of a chair. Then the door was abruptly thrust open and coldly alert eyes in a hostile, wary face, swept over the pantry.

"No one here, Excellency," said Kori; and he returned to his place at the table.

But with him came another, unseen, to stand against the wall beside a great mahogany buffet, and to listen and watch. Kori had, not unnaturally, held the door open while he glanced around the pantry. And under Kori's outstretched arm, so close as to brush against his uniformed legs, had stolen Thorn.

"Then, gentlemen, it is all arranged?" said the man at the head of the oval table--a spare, elderly individual with bristling gray mustachios and smoldering dark eyes. "The plans leave for Arvania to-morrow night, to arrive in our capital city in ten days. Then day and night manufacture of the Ziegler projectors--and declaration of war. Following
that, this great city of Washington, and the even greater cities of New York and Chicago, and all, this fine land from
Atlantic to Pacific, shall become an Arvanian possession to exploit as we like!"

There was an audible "Ah!" from the score of men around the table--broken by a voice in the main double
doorway of the dining room: "Gentlemen, your pardon, I am late."

Thorn looked at the speaker. He was a young fellow with an especially elaborate uniform and a face that
appeared weak and dissipated in spite of the arrogant Arvanian nose. Then a bark came to Thorn's ears--and a cold
feeling to the pit of Thorn's stomach. The newcomer had brought a dog with him!

Even as he gazed apprehensively at the dog--a rangy wolfhound--the brute growled deep in its throat and stared
at the corner by the buffet where Thorn was instinctively trying to make himself smaller.

The dog growled again, and stalked warily toward the buffet.

"Grego, down," said his master absently. Then, to the spare man at the head of the table: "I have been next
door, talking to the American Secretary of War. A dull fellow. Convinced, is he, that Arvania harbors only kind
thoughts for this great stupid nation. They shall be utterly unprepared for our attack--Grego! What ails the brute?"

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The wolfhound had evaded several outstretched hands and got to the buffet. There it crouched and cowered,
fangs showing in a snarl, eyes reddening wickedly, while the growl rattled louder in its shaggy throat.

"Perhaps the heat has affected him," said one.

All were looking at the dog now, marveling at its odd behavior. But of all the eyes that observed it a pair of
unseen eyes watched with the utmost agitation.

Thorn stared, almost hypnotized, at the creature. A dog! What rotten luck! Men might be fooled by the masking
invisibility, but there was no deceiving a dog's keen nose!

The wolfhound started forward as though to leap, then settled back. Plainly it longed to spring. Equally plainly
it was afraid of the being that so impossibly was revealed to its nostrils but not to its eyes. Meanwhile, one tearing
sweep of blunt claws or sharp fangs--and a fatal rent would appear in Thorn's encasing shell!

The dog snapped tentatively. Thorn flattened still harder against the wall, with discovery and death hovering
very closely about him. Then the beast's master intervened.

"Grego! Here, sir! A council room is no place, for thee, anyway. Here, I say! So, then--"

He hastened to the dog and caught its collar. Twisting the leather cruelly, he dragged the protesting, snarling
brute to the doors and slid them shut with the wolfhound barking and growling on the outside. "Someone put him in
his kennel," he said through the panels. A scuffling in the hall told of the execution of the order. The council room
became quiet again, and Thorn leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for an instant.

"We were saying, Soyo," the leader addressed the dog's owner, "that the Ziegler plans start for Arvania to-morrow night. All is arranged. These innocent looking bits of paper"--he thumped a small packet of documents lying
before him--"shall deliver mighty America to us!"

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A subdued cheer answered the man's words--while Thorn stared at the packet of papers with unbelieving eyes.
It had never occurred to him that the Ziegler plans might be in that very room, on the table with the rest of the welter
of letters, thumbed documents, and cups and saucers. And there they were--the vital projector plans--not in a safe or
hidden in some fantastic place, but right before his eyes!

Involuntarily his hand extended eagerly toward the packet, then was withdrawn. Not now. He was invisible--
but the papers, if he grasped them, would not be. Clenched in his unseen hand, they would be perfectly visible,
moving in jerks and starts as he raced for the door.

Like lightning his mind turned over one plan after another for making away with that precious packet. Each
scheme seemed impossible of fulfilment.

"The biggest difficulty is in getting them out of the country," the spare, elderly man was saying. "But we have
solved that. Solved it simply. I myself shall bear them, sewn in my clothes, to our native land. The American
authorities could search, on some pretext, any other of our number who tried to smuggle them out. But me they dare
not lay a finger on. That would be an overt act."

Thorn's thoughts whirled desperately on. Wait till later and follow whoever left the room with the plans? But he
hated to let them get out of his sight.

And at this point he became suddenly aware that the man named Kori was gazing fixedly at him. Thorn
was between the section of the table where Kori sat, and the angular buffet-end. Kori could not possibly
see anything but the shining mahogany, thought Thorn. And yet the man's eyes were narrowing to ominous slits as
he started in his direction.

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Thorn held his breath. Was the shielding film changing in structure? Were the repolarized atoms slowly losing
their straight-line arrangement, allowing light rays to penetrate through to his body instead of diverting them to form a pocket of invisibility around him? The film had never acted like that before--but never before had Thorn applied it to living flesh with its disintegrating heat and moisture.

"Excellency," said Kori at last, a hard edge to his voice, "look thou at that buffet. No, no--the end nearest my chair."

"Well?" said the elderly man. "I see nothing."

Thorn breathed a sigh of relief. But the relief was to be of short duration.

"Come to my place, if thou wilt, and see from here," said Kori.

The leader got up and came to Kori's place. Kori pointed straight at Thorn.

"There--seest thou anything out of the ordinary?"

"I see nothing," said the leader, after a moment. "Thine eyes, Kori, are not good."

"They are the eyes of a hawk," said Kori stubbornly. "And they see this--the vertical line of the end of that buffet does not continue straightly up and down. At its middle, the line is broken, then continues up--a fraction of an inch to the side! Like an object seen under water, distorted by the sun-rays that strike the surface!"

Thorn fairly jumped away from the buffet and stood against bare wall. Fool! Of course the light refraction would not be perfect! Why hadn't he thought of that--thought to stand clear of revealing vertical lines!

"There, it is gone," said Kori, blinking. "But something, Excellency, made that distortion of line. And something made Soyo's wolfhound act as it did! Something--"

"Art thou attempting to say a spy listens unseen in this room?" demanded the gray-mustachioed Arvanian.

"Something is odd--that is all I say."

* * * * *

All eyes were ranging along the wall against which Thorn leaned his back. All eyes finally turned to Kori. "It is nonsense." "I see nothing whatever." "Kori has drunk of champagne in place of tea!" were some of the exclamations.

And then occurred the thing that, in Thorn's perilous position, was like the self-signing of his own death warrant.

He sneezed.

That agony of helplessness, as a man's nose wrinkles and twitches and--in spite of the most desperate attempts at repression--the betraying sound forces its way out! How many men have lost their lives because of that insistent soft nasal explosion which can be smothered, but not entirely hushed!

Thorn had felt the sneeze coming on for seconds. He had fought it frantically, with life itself at stake. But he could not hold it back. In his naked body, beginning to burn with fever from the long-clogged pores and insulated not at all by the film from the coolness of the room, the seeds of that soft explosion had been planted--and they would bear fruit!

So he had sneezed!

Instantly there was chaos. Men looked at each other, and back at the blank wall from which had come the painfully muffled sound. Then all sprang to their feet.

"Champagne, is it!" Kori exulted savagely. "Did I not say my eyes were those of a hawk?"

"Double guard all doors!" roared the Arvanian leader, to the guards outside. "Someone is in the house! And you in here," he went on in a lower tone, "see that this unseen one dies!"

Soyo and several other men whipped out automatics and pointed them at the wall. Thorn dropped to the floor.

But with his quick action came Kori's voice.

"No, no! The sword, gentlemen. It is not so noisy, and covers a wider sweep."

Thorn shivered. Far rather would he have had bullets as his lot than cold steel. The prospect of being hacked to pieces, of gradually emerging from invisibility as a lump of gashed and bleeding flesh, turned him faint.

* * * * *

The Arvanians split up into orderly formation. Two went to guard the door to the butler's pantry, and two to cover the closed sliding doors to the outer hall. Six, with drawn swords sweeping back and forth before them, walked slowly toward the wall from which the sneeze had come.

Thorn set his jaws--only just catching himself in time to prevent his lips from opening in the half-snarl instinctive to the most civilized of men when danger is threatening. That lip motion would have revealed his teeth for an instant!

The sensation of perspiring heavily flamed over him again. There were so many trifling things to keep in mind! And each, if neglected, meaning certain death!

The nearest of the marching six stopped with his foot almost touching Thorn's hand. The dancing sword the man carried almost grazed the scientist's shoulder on its down sweep.

Thorn could not stay there. Lying flat along the baseboard, he would be stabbed at any instant by an inquiring
sward point.

The six spread a little. A very little. But there was room enough for Thorn to slide between the two men nearest him and roll soundlessly under the table.

There was no sanctuary for him there. The cursed Kori, with his hawk eyes, glanced under the table after stabbing vainly along the wall.

"The carpet!" he bellowed. "See how the nap is pressed down! He is under there, comrades!"

The thrusting swords raked under the table a half second or so after Thorn had rolled out the other side, upsetting a chair in his hurry.

"After him!" panted Soyo. "By the living God, this is wizardry! But he must not get away--"

"He won't!" snapped the elderly leader. "Men, form a line at the far end of the room and march slowly, shoulder to shoulder, to this end. The spy must be caught!"

* * * * *

The move was executed. All the men in the room, save the four guarding the doors, lined up and advanced slowly, swerving and slashing their swords. Like a line of workers hand-harvesting a wheat field they came--foot by foot toward the corner where Thorn turned this way and that in a vain effort to escape.

The line reached the table. Over and under and around it the swords slashed viciously, leaving no space unprobed.

Thorn clenched his fists. He gazed at the packet containing the Ziegler plans. He gazed at the guarded door leading back to the kitchen. Then he tensed himself and leaped.

"The plans!" shouted Kori hoarsely. "Look--"

The vital packet, as far as the eye could see, had suddenly grown wings, soared from the table top, and was floating rapidly, convulsively, toward the door.

"Stop him!" yelled Soyo. "Stop--"

At that instant the heads of the two who guarded the door were dashed together. The door itself slammed open. The Ziegler plans sped into the butler's pantry.

The door to the kitchen began to open just as Kori reached the pantry. An oath burst from the Arvanian's lips. He flung his sword. In the air, shoulder high, appeared suddenly a small fountain of blood. Kori yelled triumphantly.

Thorn, feeling the warm drip following the glancing slash in his shoulder, knew the veil of invisibility had at last been rent. Abandoning efforts at noiselessness, knowing that his whereabouts was constantly marked by the packet in his hand, anyway, he fled through the kitchen to the rear door.

The bolt jerked back, under the astonished eyes of the five guards who had not yet realized precisely what the commotion was all about--and who only saw a packet of papers waving in mid-air, a trickle of blood appearing out of nothing, and a bolt banging open in its slot for no reason whatever.

* * * * *

Thorn's fingers worked feverishly at the chain. But before he could begin to get it undone, the guards had recovered from their surprise and had joined the Arvanians who poured in from the dining room under Kori's lead.

With a score of men crowding the kitchen, Thorn looped back in his tracks like a hunted creature, and sought the cellar door. Four men he upset, one after another, aided by the fact that his twisting body could be only approximately placed by the papers and the wound.

Then Kori's hand swept through the air above the waving packet, to clamp over Thorn's wrist.

With an effort--that bulged the muscles of that blacksmith's fore-arm of his till it seemed they must burst through the film, Thorn whirled Kori clear off his feet and sent him stumbling into the charge of three guards. But in the meantime the cellar was barred to him by a double line of men.

Fighting for his life--and, far more important, the existence of his country--Thorn lashed out with his invisible right fist while his left clutched the plans.

A score of men arrayed in a death struggle against one! But the odds were not twenty to one. Not quite. The score could mark Thorn's general whereabouts--but they could not see his flying right fist! That was an invisible weapon that did incredible damage.

But if they could not see the fist to guard against it, they could see the results of the fist's impacts. Here a nose suddenly crumpled and an instant later gushed red. There a head was snapped back and up, while its owner slowly sagged to the floor. And all the while the still dripping wound and the packet of documents kept with devilish ingenuity between the body of some swordless guard and the impatient blades of the Arvanian nobles.

Almost, it seemed to Thorn, he would win free. Almost, it appeared to the Arvanians, the unseen one would reach the big window near the door--which the path of his wreckage indicated was his goal. But one of the wildly swinging fists of a guard caught Thorn at last.

It landed on the glass cup over his right eye, cutting a perfect circle in the skin around the eyesocket, and
tearing the film over the glass!

* * * * *

Now there were three things about the lithe, invisible body that the Arvanians could see: the crumpled papers, a slowly drying patch of blood that moved shoulder high in the air, and a blood-rimmed, ice-gray eye that glared defiance at them from apparently untenanted atmosphere.

Then came what seemed must be the end. Soyo appeared in the pantry doorway with a machine gun.

"Everybody to the end of the kitchen by the window!" he cried. "To the devil with silence--we'll spray this room with lead, and let the sound of shots bring what consequences it may!"

The men scattered. The machine gun muzzle swept toward the place where the eye, the papers, and the blood spot were to be seen.

That spot was now at one end of the great kitchen range on which a few copper pots simmered over white-hot electric burners. At the other end of the range, in the end wall of the kitchen, was a second window. It was small, less than a yard square, and had evidently been punched through the wall as an afterthought to carry off some of the heat of the huge stove.

Soyo's face twisted exultantly. The machine gun belched flame. Chasing relentlessly after the dodging, shifting blood spot, a line of holes appeared in the wall following instantly on the tap--tap--tap of the gun.

Eye and papers and blood spot appeared to float through the air. One of the copper pots on the range flew off onto the floor. The glass of the small ventilating window smashed to bits. In the jagged frame its broken edges presented, the Arvanians saw for a flashing instant the seared, blistered soles of a pair of human feet.

"Outside!" bawled Kori. "He jumped onto the range and dove through the window! After him!"

* * * * *

After precious seconds had been wasted, the rear door was unchained and wrenched open. The Arvanians, swords and guns drawn, raced out to the rear yard.

His Excellency's town car, that had been standing in front of the open garage doors, leaped into life. With motor roaring wide open, it tore toward the Arvanians, some of whom leaped aside and some of whom were hurled to right and left by the heavy fenders....

Startled people on Sixteenth Street saw a great town car swaying down the asphalt seemingly guided by no hand other than that of fate; some said afterward they saw a single eye gleaming through the windshield, but no one believed that. Equally startled people saw the car screech to a stop in front of the home of the Secretary of War. After it, scarcely a full minute later, three motors with the Arvanian coat of arms on them came to a halt.

"My dear fellow," said the Secretary blandly to the livid Arvanian Ambassador, "no one has come in here with papers or anything else. I saw a man jump out of your town car and run south on Connecticut Avenue. That's all I know."

"But I tell you--" shrieked the Arvanian.

He stopped, impaled on the Secretary's icy cold glance.

"Your story is rather incredible," murmured the Secretary. "Valuable plans stolen from your Embassy by an invisible man? Come, come!"

Dark Arvanian eyes glared into light American ones.

"By the way," said the Secretary affably, "I am thinking of giving a semi-official banquet to celebrate future, friendly relations between our two countries. Do you approve?"

The Arvanian Ambassador tugged at his collar to straighten it. World dominion had been in his fingers--and had slipped through--but he would not have been a diplomat had he let his face continue to express the bitterness in his heart.

"I think such a banquet would be a splendid idea," he said suavely.

Contents

THE STOKER AND THE STARS
By Algis Budrys

When you've had your ears pinned back in a bowknot, it's sometimes hard to remember that an intelligent people has no respect for a whipped enemy ... but does for a fairly beaten enemy.

Know him? Yes, I know him--knew him. That was twenty years ago.
Everybody knows him now. Everybody who passed him on the street knows him. Everybody who went to the
same schools, or even to different schools in different towns, knows him now. Ask them. But I knew him. I lived
three feet away from him for a month and a half. I shipped with him and called him by his first name.

What was he like? What was he thinking, sitting on the edge of his bunk with his jaw in his palm and his eyes
on the stars? What did he think he was after?

Well ... Well, I think he-- You know, I think I never did know him, after all. Not well. Not as well as some of
those people who're writing the books about him seem to.

I couldn't really describe him to you. He had a duffelbag in his hand and a packed airsuit on his back. The skin
of his face had been dried out by ship's air, burned by ultraviolet and broiled by infra red. The pupils of his eyes had
little cloudy specks in them where the cosmic rays had shot through them. But his eyes were steady and his body
was hard. What did he look like? He looked like a man.

* * * * *

It was after the war, and we were beaten. There used to be a school of thought among us that deplored our
combativeness; before we had ever met any people from off Earth, even, you could hear people saying we were
toughest, cruelest life-form in the Universe, unfit to mingle with the gentler wiser races in the stars, and a sure bet to
steal their galaxy and corrupt it forever. Where these people got their information, I don't know.

We were beaten. We moved out beyond Centaurus, and Sirius, and then we met the Jeks, the Nosurwey, the
Lud. We tried Terrestrial know-how, we tried Production Miracles, we tried patriotism, we tried damning the
torpedoes and full speed ahead ... and we were smashed back like mayflies in the wind. We died in droves, and we
retreated from the guttering fires of a dozen planets, we dug in, we fought through the last ditch, and we were dying
on Earth itself before Baker mutinied, shot Cope, and surrendered the remainder of the human race to the wiser,
gentler races in the stars. That way, we lived. That way, we were permitted to carry on our little concerns, and mind
our manners. The Jeks and the Lud and the Nosurwey returned to their own affairs, and we knew they would leave
us alone so long as we didn't bother them.

We liked it that way. Understand me--we didn't accept it, we didn't knuckle under with waiting murder in our
hearts--we liked it. We were grateful just to be left alone again. We were happy we hadn't been wiped out like the
upstarts the rest of the Universe thought us to be. When they let us keep our own solar system and carry on a trickle
of trade with the outside, we accepted it for the fantastically generous gift it was. Too many of our best men were
dead for us to have any remaining claim on these things in our own right. I know how it was. I was there, twenty
years ago. I was a little, pudgy man with short breath and a high-pitched voice. I was a typical Earthman.

* * * * *

We were out on a God-forsaken landing field on Mars, MacReidie and I, loading cargo aboard the Serenus.
MacReidie was First Officer. I was Second. The stranger came walking up to us.

"Got a job?" he asked, looking at MacReidie.

Mac looked him over. He saw the same things I'd seen. He shook his head. "Not for you. The only thing we're
short on is stokers."

You wouldn't know. There's no such thing as a stoker any more, with automatic ships. But the stranger knew
what Mac meant.

Serenus had what they called an electronic drive. She had to run with an evacuated engine room. The leaking
electricity would have broken any stray air down to ozone, which eats metal and rots lungs. So the engine room had
the air pumped out of her, and the stokers who tended the dials and set the cathode attitudes had to wear suits,
smelling themselves for twelve hours at a time and standing a good chance of cooking where they sat when the drive
arced. Serenus was an ugly old tub. At that, we were the better of the two interstellar freighters the human race had
left.

"You're bound over the border, aren't you?"

MacReidie nodded. "That's right. But--"

"I'll stoke."

MacReidie looked over toward me and frowned. I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. I was a little afraid of the
stranger, too.

The trouble was the look of him. It was the look you saw in the bars back on Earth, where the veterans of the
war sat and stared down into their glasses, waiting for night to fall so they could go out into the alleys and have
drunken fights among themselves. But he had brought that look to Mars, to the landing field, and out here there was
something disquieting about it.

He'd caught Mac's look and turned his head to me. "I'll stoke," he repeated.

I didn't know what to say. MacReidie and I--almost all of the men in the Merchant Marine--hadn't served in the
combat arms. We had freighted supplies, and we had seen ships dying on the runs--we'd had our own brushes with
commerce raiders, and we'd known enough men who joined the combat forces. But very few of the men came back, and the war this man had fought hadn't been the same as ours. He'd commanded a fighting ship, somewhere, and come to grips with things we simply didn't know about. The mark was on him, but not on us. I couldn't meet his eyes. "O.K. by me," I mumbled at last.

I saw MacReidie's mouth turn down at the corners. But he couldn't gainsay the man any more than I could. MacReidie wasn't a mumbling man, so he said angrily: "O.K., bucko, you'll stoke. Go and sign on."

"Thanks." The stranger walked quietly away. He wrapped a hand around the cable on a cargo hook and rode into the hold on top of some freight. Mac spat on the ground and went back to supervising his end of the loading. I was busy with mine, and it wasn't until we'd gotten the Serenus loaded and buttoned up that Mac and I even spoke to each other again. Then we talked about the trip. We didn't talk about the stranger.

* * * * *

Daniels, the Third, had signed him on and had moved him into the empty bunk above mine. We slept all in a bunch on the Serenus--officers and crew. Even so, we had to sleep in shifts, with the ship's designers giving ninety per cent of her space to cargo, and eight per cent to power and control. That left very little for the people, who were crammed in any way they could be. I said empty bunk. What I meant was, empty during my sleep shift. That meant he and I'd be sharing work shifts--me up in the control blister, parked in a soft chair, and him down in the engine room, broiling in a suit for twelve hours.

But I ate with him, used the head with him; you can call that rubbing elbows with greatness, if you want to.

He was a very quiet man. Quiet in the way he moved and talked. When we were both climbing into our bunks, that first night, I introduced myself and he introduced himself. Then he heaved himself into his bunk, rolled over on his side, fixed his straps, and fell asleep. He was always friendly toward me, but he must have been very tired that first night. I often wondered what kind of a life he'd lived after the war--what he'd done that made him different from the men who simply grew older in the bars. I wonder, now, if he really did do anything different. In an odd way, I like to think that one day, in a bar, on a day that seemed like all the rest to him when it began, he suddenly looked up with some new thought, put down his glass, and walked straight to the Earth-Mars shuttle field.

He might have come from any town on Earth. Don't believe the historians too much. Don't pay too much attention to the Chamber of Commerce plaques. When a man's name becomes public property, strange things happen to the facts.

* * * * *

It was MacReidie who first found out what he'd done during the war.

I've got to explain about MacReidie. He takes his opinions fast and strong. He's a good man--is, or was; I haven't seen him for a long while--but he liked things simple.

MacReidie said the duffelbag broke loose and floated into the middle of the bunkroom during acceleration. He opened it to see whose it was. When he found out, he closed it up and strapped it back in its place at the foot of the stoker's bunk.

MacReidie was my relief on the bridge. When he came up, he didn't relieve me right away. He stood next to my chair and looked out through the ports.

"Captain leave any special instructions in the Order Book?" he asked.

"Just the usual. Keep a tight watch and proceed cautiously."

"That new stoker," Mac said.

"Yeah?"

"I knew there was something wrong with him. He's got an old Marine uniform in his duffel."

I didn't say anything. Mac glanced over at me. "Well?"

"I don't know." I didn't.

I couldn't say I was surprised. It had to be something like that, about the stoker. The mark was on him, as I've said.

It was the Marines that did Earth's best dying. It had to be. They were trained to be the best we had, and they believed in their training. They were the ones who slashed back the deepest when the other side hit us. They were the ones who sallied out into the doomed spaces between the stars and took the war to the other side as well as any human force could ever hope to. They were always the last to leave an abandoned position. If Earth had been giving medals to members of her forces in the war, every man in the Corps would have had the Medal of Honor two and three times over. Posthumously. I don't believe there were ten of them left alive when Cope was shot. Cope was one of them. They were a kind of human being neither MacReidie nor I could hope to understand.

"You don't know," Mac said. "It's there. In his duffel. Damn it, we're going out to trade with his sworn enemies! Why do you suppose he wanted to sign on? Why do you suppose he's so eager to go!"

"You think he's going to try to start something?"
"Think! That's exactly what he's going for. One last big alley fight. One last brawl. When they cut him down--

- do you suppose they'll stop with him? They'll kill us, and then they'll go in and stamp Earth flat! You know it as well as I do."

"I don't know, Mac," I said. "Go easy." I could feel the knots in my stomach. I didn't want any trouble. Not from the stoker, not from Mac. None of us wanted trouble--not even Mac, but he'd cause it to get rid of it, if you follow what I mean about his kind of man.

Mac hit the viewport with his fist. "Easy! Easy--nothing's easy. I hate this life," he said in a murderous voice. "I don't know why I keep signing on. Mars to Centaurus and back, back and forth, in an old rust tub that's going to blow herself up one of these--"*

Daniels called me on the phone from Communications. "Turn up your Intercom volume," he said. "The stoker's jamming the circuit."

I kicked the selector switch over, and this is what I got:

"--so there we were at a million per, and the air was gettin' thick. The Skipper says 'Cheer up, brave boys, we'll--"

He was singing. He had a terrible voice, but he could carry a tune, and he was hammering it out at the top of his lungs.

"Twas the last cruise of the Venus, by God you should of seen us! The pipes were full of whisky, and just to make things risky, the jets were ..."

The crew were chuckling into their own chest phones. I could hear Daniels trying to cut him off. But he kept going. I started laughing myself. No one's supposed to jam an intercom, but it made the crew feel good. When the crew feels good, the ship runs right, and it had been a long time since they'd been happy.

He went on for another twenty minutes. Then his voice thinned out, and I heard him cough a little. "Daniels," he said, "get a relief down here for me. Jump to it!" He said the last part in a Master's voice. Daniels didn't ask questions. He sent a man on his way down.

He'd been singing, the stoker had. He'd been singing while he worked with one arm dead, one sleeve ripped open and badly patched because the fabric was slippery with blood. There'd been a flashover in the drivers. By the time his relief got down there, he had the insulation back on, and the drive was purring along the way it should have been. It hadn't even missed a beat.

He went down to sick bay, got the arm wrapped, and would have gone back on shift if Daniels'd let him.

Those of us who were going off shift found him toying with the theremin in the mess compartment. He didn't know how to play it, and it sounded like a dog howling.

"Sing, will you!" somebody yelled. He grinned and went back to the "Good Ship Venus." It wasn't good, but it was loud. From that, we went to "Starways, Farways, and Barways," and "The Freefall Song." Somebody started "I Left Her Behind For You," and that got us off into sentimental things, the way these sessions would sometimes wind up when spacemen were far from home. But not since the war, we all seemed to realize together. We stopped, and looked at each other, and we all began drifting out of the mess compartment.

And maybe it got to him, too. It may explain something. He and I were the last to leave. We went to the bunkroom, and he stopped in the middle of taking off his shirt. He stood there, looking out the porthole, and forgot I was there. I heard him reciting something, softly, under his breath, and I stepped a little closer. This is what it was:

"The rockets rise against the skies, Slowly; in sunlight gleaming With silver hue upon the blue. And the universe waits, dreaming."

What was he thinking of? Make your own choice. I think I came close to knowing him, at that moment, but until human beings turn telepath, no man can be sure of another.

He shook himself like a dog out of cold water, and got into his bunk. I got into mine, and after a while I fell asleep.

I don't know what MacReidie may have told the skipper about the stoker, or if he tried to tell him anything. The captain was the senior ticket holder in the Merchant Service, and a good man, in his day. He kept mostly to his cabin. And there was nothing MacReidie could do on his own authority--nothing simple, that is. And the stoker had saved the ship, and ...
was that it would have meant trouble in the ship. Trouble, confined to our little percentage of the ship's volume, could seem like something much more important than the fate of the human race. It may not seem that way to you. But as long as no one began anything, we could all get along. We could have a good trip.

MacReidie worried, I'm sure. I worried, sometimes. But nothing happened.

When we reached Alpha Centaurus, and set down at the trading field on the second planet, it was the same as the other trips we'd made, and the same kind of landfall. The Lud factor came out of his post after we'd waited for a while, and gave us our permit to disembark. There was a Jek ship at the other end of the field, loaded with the cargo we would get in exchange for our holdful of goods. We had the usual things; wine, music tapes, furs, and the like. The Jeks had been giving us light machinery lately--probably we'd get two or three more loads, and then they'd begin giving us something else.

But I found that this trip wasn't quite the same. I found myself looking at the factor's post, and I realized for the first time that the Lud hadn't built it. It was a leftover from the old colonial human government. And the city on the horizon--men had built it; the touch of our architecture was on every building. I wondered why it had never occurred to me that this was so. It made the landfall different from all the others, somehow. It gave a new face to the entire planet.

* * * * *

Mac and I and some of the other crewmen went down on the field to handle the unloading. Jeks on self-propelled cargo lifts jockeyed among us, scooping up the loads as we unhooked the slings, bringing cases of machinery from their own ship. They sat atop their vehicles, lean and aloof, dashing in, whirling, shooting across the field to their ship and back like wild horsemen on the plains of Earth, paying us no notice.

We were almost through when Mac suddenly grabbed my arm. "Look!"

The stoker was coming down on one of the cargo slings. He stood upright, his booted feet planted wide, one arm curled up over his head and around the hoist cable. He was in his dusty brown Marine uniform, the scarlet collar tabs bright as blood at his throat, his major's insignia glittering at his shoulders, the battle stripes on his sleeves.

The Jeks stopped their lifts. They knew that uniform. They sat up in their saddles and watched him come down. When the sling touched the ground, he jumped off quietly and walked toward the nearest Jek. They all followed him with their eyes.

"We've got to stop him," Mac said, and both of us started toward him. His hands were both in plain sight, one holding his duffelbag, which was swelled out with the bulk of his airsuit. He wasn't carrying a weapon of any kind. He was walking casually, taking his time.

Mac and I had almost reached him when a Jek with insignia on his coveralls suddenly jumped down from his lift and came forward to meet him. It was an odd thing to see--the stoker, and the Jek, who did not stand as tall. MacReidie and I stepped back.

The Jek was coal black, his scales glittering in the cold sunlight, his hatchet-face inscrutable. He stopped when the stoker was a few paces away. The stoker stopped, too. All the Jeks were watching him and paying no attention to anything else. The field might as well have been empty except for those two.

"They'll kill him. They'll kill him right now," MacReidie whispered.

They ought to have. If I'd been a Jek, I would have thought that uniform was a death warrant. But the Jek spoke to him:

"Are you entitled to wear that?"

"I was at this planet in '39. I was closer to your home world the year before that," the stoker said. "I was captain of a destroyer. If I'd had a cruiser's range, I would have reached it." He looked at the Jek. "Where were you?"

"I was here when you were."

"I want to speak to your ship's captain."

"All right. I'll drive you over."

The stoker nodded, and they walked over to his vehicle together. They drove away, toward the Jek ship.

"All right, let's get back to work," another Jek said to MacReidie and myself, and we went back to unloading cargo.

* * * * *

The stoker came back to our ship that night, without his duffelbag. He found me and said:

"I'm signing off the ship. Going with the Jeks."

MacReidie was with me. He said loudly: "What do you mean, you're going with the Jeks?"

"I signed on their ship," the stoker said. "Stoking. They've got a micro-nuclear drive. It's been a while since I worked with one, but I think I'll make out all right, even with the screwball way they've got it set up."

"Huh?"

The stoker shrugged. "Ships are ships, and physics is physics, no matter where you go. I'll make out."
"What kind of a deal did you make with them? What do you think you're up to?"

The stoker shook his head. "No deal. I signed on as a crewman. I'll do a crewman's work for a crewman's wages. I thought I'd wander around a while. It ought to be interesting," he said.

"On a Jek ship."

"Anybody's ship. When I get to their home world, I'll probably ship out with some people from farther on. Why not? It's honest work."

MacReidie had no answer to that.

"But--" I said.

"What?" He looked at me as if he couldn't understand what might be bothering me, but I think perhaps he could.

"Nothing," I said, and that was that, except MacReidie was always a sourer man from that time up to as long as I knew him afterwards. We took off in the morning. The stoker had already left on the Jek ship, and it turned out he'd trained an apprentice boy to take his place.

* * * * *

It was strange how things became different for us, little by little after that. It was never anything you could put your finger on, but the Jeks began taking more goods, and giving us things we needed when we told them we wanted them. After a while, Serenus was going a little deeper into Jek territory, and when she wore out, the two replacements let us trade with the Lud, too. Then it was the Nosurwey, and other people beyond them, and things just got better for us, somehow.

We heard about our stoker, occasionally. He shipped with the Lud, and the Nosurwey, and some people beyond them, getting along, going to all kinds of places. Pay no attention to the precise red lines you see on the star maps; nobody knows exactly what path he wandered from people to people. Nobody could. He just kept signing on with whatever ship was going deeper into the galaxy, going farther and farther. He messed with green shipmates and blue ones. One and two and three heads, tails, six legs--after all, ships are ships and they've all got to have something to push them along. If a man knows his business, why not? A man can live on all kinds of food, if he wants to get used to it. And any nontoxic atmosphere will do, as long as there's enough oxygen in it.

I don't know what he did, to make things so much better for us. I don't know if he did anything, but stoke their ships and, I suppose, fix them when they were in trouble. I wonder if he sang dirty songs in that bad voice of his, to people who couldn't possibly understand what the songs were about. All I know is, for some reason those people slowly began treating us with respect. We changed, too, I think--I'm not the same man I was ... I think--not altogether the same; I'm a captain now, with master's papers, and you won't find me in my cabin very often ... there's a kind of joy in standing on a bridge, looking out at the stars you're moving toward. I wonder if it mightn't have kept my old captain out of that place he died in, finally, if he'd tried it.

So, I don't know. The older I get, the less I know. The thing people remember the stoker for--the thing that makes him famous, and, I think, annoys him--I'm fairly sure is only incidental to what he really did. If he did anything. If he meant to. I wish I could be sure of the exact answer he found in the bottom of that last glass at the bar before he worked his passage to Mars and the Serenus, and began it all.

So, I can't say what he ought to be famous for. But I suppose it's enough to know for sure that he was the first living being ever to travel all the way around the galaxy.

THE END
Mr. Jonathon Chambers left his house on Maple Street at exactly seven o'clock in the evening and set out on the
daily walk he had taken, at the same time, come rain or snow, for twenty solid years.

The walk never varied. He paced two blocks down Maple Street, stopped at the Red Star confectionery to buy a
Rose Trofero perfecto, then walked to the end of the fourth block on Maple. There he turned right on Lexington,
followed Lexington to Oak, down Oak and so by way of Lincoln back to Maple again and to his home.

He didn't walk fast. He took his time. He always returned to his front door at exactly 7:45. No one ever stopped
to talk with him. Even the man at the Red Star confectionery, where he bought his cigar, remained silent while the
purchase was being made. Mr. Chambers merely tapped on the glass top of the counter with a coin, the man reached
in and brought forth the box, and Mr. Chambers took his cigar. That was all.

For people long ago had gathered that Mr. Chambers desired to be left alone. The newer generation of
townsfolk called it eccentricity. Certain uncouth persons had a different word for it. The oldsters remembered that
this queer looking individual with his black silk muffler, rosewood cane and bowler hat once had been a professor at
State University.

A professor of metaphysics, they seemed to recall, or some such outlandish subject. At any rate a furor of
some sort was connected with his name ... at the time an academic scandal. He had written a book, and he had taught
the subject matter of that volume to his classes. What that subject matter was, had long been forgotten, but whatever
it had been considered sufficiently revolutionary to cost Mr. Chambers his post at the university.

A silver moon shone over the chimney tops and a chill, impish October wind was rustling the dead leaves when
Mr. Chambers started out at seven o'clock.

It was a good night, he told himself, smelling the clean, crisp air of autumn and the faint pungence of distant
wood smoke.

He walked unhurriedly, swinging his cane a bit less jauntily than twenty years ago. He tucked the muffler more
securely under the rusty old topcoat and pulled his bowler hat more firmly on his head.

He noticed that the street light at the corner of Maple and Jefferson was out and he grumbled a little to himself
when he was forced to step off the walk to circle a boarded-off section of newly-laid concrete work before the
driveway of 816.

It seemed that he reached the corner of Lexington and Maple just a bit too quickly, but he told himself that this
couldn't be. For he never did that. For twenty years, since the year following his expulsion from the university, he
had lived by the clock.

The same thing, at the same time, day after day. He had not deliberately set upon such a life of routine. A
bachelor, living alone with sufficient money to supply his humble needs, the timed existence had grown on him
gradually.

So he turned on Lexington and back on Oak. The dog at the corner of Oak and Jefferson was waiting for him
once again and came out snarling and growling, snapping at his heels. But Mr. Chambers pretended not to notice
and the beast gave up the chase.

A radio was blaring down the street and faint wisps of what it was blaring floated to Mr. Chambers.
"... still taking place ... Empire State building disappeared ... thin air ... famed scientist, Dr. Edmund
Harcourt...."

The wind whipped the muted words away and Mr. Chambers grumbled to himself. Another one of those
fantastic radio dramas, probably. He remembered one from many years before, something about the Martians. And
Harcourt! What did Harcourt have to do with it? He was one of the men who had ridiculed the book Mr. Chambers
had written.

But he pushed speculation away, sniffed the clean, crisp air again, looked at the familiar things that
materialized out of the late autumn darkness as he walked along. For there was nothing ... absolutely nothing in the
world ... that he would let upset him. That was a tenet he had laid down twenty years ago.
* * * * *

There was a crowd of men in front of the drugstore at the corner of Oak and Lincoln and they were talking
excitedly. Mr. Chambers caught some excited words: "It's happening everywhere.... What do you think it is.... The
scientists can't explain...."
But as Mr. Chambers neared them they fell into what seemed an abashed silence and watched him pass. He, on his part, gave them no sign of recognition. That was the way it had been for many years, ever since the people had become convinced that he did not wish to talk.

One of the men half started forward as if to speak to him, but then stepped back and Mr. Chambers continued on his walk.

Back at his own front door he stopped and as he had done a thousand times before drew forth the heavy gold watch from his pocket.

He started violently. It was only 7:30!

For long minutes he stood there staring at the watch in accusation. The timepiece hadn't stopped, for it still ticked audibly.

But 15 minutes too soon! For twenty years, day in, day out, he had started out at seven and returned at a quarter of eight. Now....

It wasn't until then that he realized something else was wrong. He had no cigar. For the first time he had neglected to purchase his evening smoke.

Shaken, muttering to himself, Mr. Chambers let himself in his house and locked the door behind him.

He hung his hat and coat on the rack in the hall and walked slowly into the living room. Dropping into his favorite chair, he shook his head in bewilderment.

Silence filled the room. A silence that was measured by the ticking of the old fashioned pendulum clock on the mantelpiece.

But silence was no strange thing to Mr. Chambers. Once he had loved music ... the kind of music he could get by tuning in symphonic orchestras on the radio. But the radio stood silent in the corner, the cord out of its socket. Mr. Chambers had pulled it out many years before. To be precise, upon the night when the symphonic broadcast had been interrupted to give a news flash.

He had stopped reading newspapers and magazines too, had exiled himself to a few city blocks. And as the years flowed by, that self exile had become a prison, an intangible, impassable wall bounded by four city blocks by three. Beyond them lay utter, unexplainable terror. Beyond them he never went.

But recluse though he was, he could not on occasion escape from hearing things. Things the newsboy shouted on the streets, things the men talked about on the drugstore corner when they didn't see him coming.

And so he knew that this was the year 1960 and that the wars in Europe and Asia had flamed to an end to be followed by a terrible plague, a plague that even now was sweeping through country after country like wild fire, decimating populations. A plague undoubtedly induced by hunger and privation and the miseries of war.

But those things he put away as items far removed from his own small world. He disregarded them. He pretended he had never heard of them. Others might discuss and worry over them if they wished. To him they simply did not matter.

But there were two things tonight that did matter. Two curious, incredible events. He had arrived home fifteen minutes early. He had forgotten his cigar.

Huddled in the chair, he frowned slowly. It was disquieting to have something like that happen. There must be something wrong. Had his long exile finally turned his mind ... perhaps just a very little ... enough to make him queer? Had he lost his sense of proportion, of perspective?

No, he hadn't. Take this room, for example. After twenty years it had come to be as much a part of him as the clothes he wore. Every detail of the room was engraved in his mind with ... clarity; the old center leg table with its green covering and stained glass lamp; the mantelpiece with the dusty bric-a-brac; the pendulum clock that told the time of day as well as the day of the week and month; the elephant ash tray on the tabaret and, most important of all, the marine print.

Mr. Chambers loved that picture. It had depth, he always said. It showed an old sailing ship in the foreground on a placid sea. Far in the distance, almost on the horizon line, was the vague outline of a larger vessel.

There were other pictures, too. The forest scene above the fireplace, the old English prints in the corner where he sat, the Currier and Ives above the radio. But the ship print was directly in his line of vision. He could see it without turning his head. He had put it there because he liked it best.

Further reverie became an effort as Mr. Chambers felt himself succumbing to weariness. He undressed and went to bed. For an hour he lay awake, assailed by vague fears he could neither define nor understand.

When finally he dozed off it was to lose himself in a series of horrific dreams. He dreamed first that he was a castaway on a tiny islet in mid-ocean, that the waters around the island teemed with huge poisonous sea snakes ... hydrophinnae ... and that steadily those serpents were devouring the island.

In another dream he was pursued by a horror which he could neither see nor hear, but only could imagine. And as he sought to flee he stayed in the one place. His legs worked frantically, pumping like pistons, but he could make...
no progress. It was as if he ran upon a treadway.

Then again the terror descended on him, a black, unimagined thing and he tried to scream and couldn't. He opened his mouth and strained his vocal cords and filled his lungs to bursting with the urge to shriek ... but not a sound came from his lips.

* * * * *

All next day he was uneasy and as he left the house that evening, at precisely seven o'clock, he kept saying to himself: "You must not forget tonight! You must remember to stop and get your cigar!"

The street light at the corner of Jefferson was still out and in front of 816 the cemented driveway was still boarded off. Everything was the same as the night before.

And now, he told himself, the Red Star confectionery is in the next block. I must not forget tonight. To forget twice in a row would be just too much.

He grasped that thought firmly in his mind, strode just a bit more rapidly down the street.

But at the corner he stopped in consternation. Bewildered, he stared down the next block. There was no neon sign, no splash of friendly light upon the sidewalk to mark the little store tucked away in this residential section.

He stared at the street marker and read the word slowly: GRANT. He read it again, unbelieving, for this shouldn't be Grant Street, but Marshall. He had walked two blocks and the confectionery was between Marshall and Grant. He hadn't come to Marshall yet ... and here was Grant.

Or had he, absent-mindedly, come one block farther than he thought, passed the store as on the night before?

For the first time in twenty years, Mr. Chambers retraced his steps. He walked back to Jefferson, then turned around and went back to Grant again and on to Lexington. Then back to Grant again, where he stood astounded while a single, incredible fact grew slowly in his brain:

There wasn't any confectionery! The block from Marshall to Grant had disappeared!

Now he understood why he had missed the store on the night before, why he had arrived home fifteen minutes early.

On legs that were dead things he stumbled back to his home. He slammed and locked the door behind him and made his way unsteadily to his chair in the corner.

What was this? What did it mean? By what inconceivable necromancy could a paved street with houses, trees and buildings be spirited away and the space it had occupied be closed up?

Was something happening in the world which he, in his secluded life, knew nothing about?

Mr. Chambers shivered, reached to turn up the collar of his coat, then stopped as he realized the room must be warm. A fire blazed merrily in the grate. The cold he felt came from something ... somewhere else. The cold of fear and horror, the chill of a half whispered thought.

A deathly silence had fallen, a silence still measured by the pendulum clock. And yet a silence that held a different tenor than he had ever sensed before. Not a homey, comfortable silence ... but a silence that hinted at emptiness and nothingness.

There was something back of this, Mr. Chambers told himself. Something that reached far back into one corner of his brain and demanded recognition. Something tied up with the fragments of talk he had heard on the drugstore corner, bits of news broadcasts he had heard as he walked along the street, the shrieking of the newsboy calling his papers. Something to do with the happenings in the world from which he had excluded himself.

* * * * *

He brought them back to mind now and lingered over the one central theme of the talk he overheard: the wars and plagues. Hints of a Europe and Asia swept almost clean of human life, of the plague ravaging Africa, of its appearance in South America, of the frantic efforts of the United States to prevent its spread into that nation's boundaries.

Millions of people were dead in Europe and Asia, Africa and South America. Billions, perhaps.

And somehow those gruesome statistics seemed tied up with his own experience. Something, somewhere, some part of his earlier life, seemed to hold an explanation. But try as he would his befuddled brain failed to find the answer.

The pendulum clock struck slowly, its every other chime as usual setting up a sympathetic vibration in the pewter vase that stood upon the mantel.

Mr. Chambers got to his feet, strode to the door, opened it and looked out.

Moonlight tesselated the street in black and silver, etching the chimneys and trees against a silvered sky.

But the house directly across the street was not the same. It was strangely lop-sided, its dimensions out of proportion, like a house that suddenly had gone mad.

He stared at it in amazement, trying to determine what was wrong with it. He recalled how it had always stood, foursquare, a solid piece of mid-Victorian architecture.
Then, before his eyes, the house righted itself again. Slowly it drew together, ironed out its queer angles, readjusted its dimensions, became once again the stodgy house he knew it had to be.

With a sigh of relief, Mr. Chambers turned back into the hall.

But before he closed the door, he looked again. The house was lop-sided ... as bad, perhaps worse than before! Gulping in fright, Mr. Chambers slammed the door shut, locked it and double bolted it. Then he went to his bedroom and took two sleeping powders.

His dreams that night were the same as on the night before. Again there was the islet in mid-ocean. Again he was alone upon it. Again the squirming hydrophinnae were eating his foothold piece by piece.

He awoke, body drenched with perspiration. Vague light of early dawn filtered through the window. The clock on the bedside table showed 7:30. For a long time he lay there motionless.

Again the fantastic happenings of the night before came back to haunt him and as he lay there, staring at the windows, he remembered them, one by one. But his mind, still fogged by sleep and astonishment, took the happenings in its stride, mulled over them, lost the keen edge of fantastic terror that lurked around them.

The light through the windows slowly grew brighter. Mr. Chambers slid out of bed, slowly crossed to the window, the cold of the floor biting into his bare feet. He forced himself to look out.

There was nothing outside the window. No shadows. As if there might be a fog. But no fog, however, thick, could hide the apple tree that grew close against the house.

But the tree was there ... shadowy, indistinct in the gray, with a few withered apples still clinging to its boughs, a few shriveled leaves reluctant to leave the parent branch.

The tree was there now. But it hadn't been when he first had looked. Mr. Chambers was sure of that.

* * * * *

And now he saw the faint outlines of his neighbor's house ... but those outlines were all wrong. They didn't jibe and fit together ... they were out of plumb. As if some giant hand had grasped the house and wrenched it out of true. Like the house he had seen across the street the night before, the house that had painfully righted itself when he thought of how it should look.

Perhaps if he thought of how his neighbor's house should look, it too might right itself. But Mr. Chambers was very weary. Too weary to think about the house.

He turned from the window and dressed slowly. In the living room he slumped into his chair, put his feet on the old cracked ottoman. For a long time he sat, trying to think.

And then, abruptly, something like an electric shock ran through him. Rigid, he sat there, limp inside at the thought. Minutes later he arose and almost ran across the room to the old mahogany bookcase that stood against the wall.

There were many volumes in the case: his beloved classics on the first shelf, his many scientific works on the lower shelves. The second shelf contained but one book. And it was around this book that Mr. Chambers' entire life was centered.

Twenty years ago he had written it and foolishly attempted to teach its philosophy to a class of undergraduates. The newspapers, he remembered, had made a great deal of it at the time. Tongues had been set to wagging. Narrow-minded townsfolk, failing to understand either his philosophy or his aim, but seeing in him another exponent of some anti-rational cult, had forced his expulsion from the school.

It was a simple book, really, dismissed by most authorities as merely the vagaries of an over-zealous mind.

Mr. Chambers took it down now, opened its cover and began thumbing slowly through the pages. For a moment the memory of happier days swept over him.

Then his eyes focused on the paragraph, a paragraph written so long ago the very words seemed strange and unreal:

Man himself, by the power of mass suggestion, holds the physical fate of this earth ... yes, even the universe. Billions of minds seeing trees as trees, houses as houses, streets as streets ... and not as something else. Minds that see things as they are and have kept things as they were.... Destroy those minds and the entire foundation of matter, robbed of its regenerative power, will crumble and slip away like a column of sand....

His eyes followed down the page:

Yet this would have nothing to do with matter itself ... but only with matter's form. For while the mind of man through long ages may have moulded an imagery of that space in which he lives, mind would have little conceivable influence upon the existence of that matter. What exists in our known universe shall exist always and can never be destroyed, only altered or transformed.

But in modern astrophysics and mathematics we gain an insight into the possibility ... yes probability ... that there are other dimensions, other brackets of time and space impinging on the one we occupy.

If a pin is thrust into a shadow, would that shadow have any knowledge of the pin? It would not, for in this case
the shadow is two dimensional, the pin three dimensional. Yet both occupy the same space.

Granting then that the power of men's minds alone holds this universe, or at least this world in its present form, may we not go farther and envision other minds in some other plane watching us, waiting, waiting craftily for the time they can take over the domination of matter? Such a concept is not impossible. It is a natural conclusion if we accept the double hypothesis: that mind does control the formation of all matter; and that other worlds lie in juxtaposition with ours.

Perhaps we shall come upon a day, far distant, when our plane, our world will dissolve beneath our feet and before our eyes as some stronger intelligence reaches out from the dimensional shadows of the very space we live in and wrests from us the matter which we know to be our own.

* * * * *

He stood astounded beside the bookcase, his eyes staring unseeing into the fire upon the hearth.

He had written that. And because of those words he had been called a heretic, had been compelled to resign his position at the university, had been forced into this hermit life.

A tumultuous idea hammered at him. Men had died by the millions all over the world. Where there had been thousands of minds there now were one or two. A feeble force to hold the form of matter intact.

* * * * *

The plague had swept Europe and Asia almost clean of life, had blighted Africa, had reached South America ... might even have come to the United States. He remembered the whispers he had heard, the words of the men at the drugstore corner, the buildings disappearing. Something scientists could not explain. But those were merely scraps of information. He did not know the whole story ... he could not know. He never listened to the radio, never read a newspaper.

But abruptly the whole thing fitted together in his brain like the missing piece of a puzzle into its slot. The significance of it all gripped him with damning clarity.

There were not sufficient minds in existence to retain the material world in its mundane form. Some other power from another dimension was fighting to supersede man's control and take his universe into its own plane!

Abruptly Mr. Chambers closed the book, shoved it back in the case and picked up his hat and coat.

He had to know more. He had to find someone who could tell him.

He moved through the hall to the door, emerged into the street. On the walk he looked skyward, trying to make out the sun. But there wasn't any sun ... only an all pervading grayness that shrouded everything ... not a gray fog, but a gray emptiness that seemed devoid of life, of any movement.

The walk led to his gate and there it ended, but as he moved forward the sidewalk came into view and the house ahead loomed out of the gray, but a house with differences.

He moved forward rapidly. Visibility extended only a few feet and as he approached them the houses materialized like two dimensional pictures without perspective, like twisted cardboard soldiers lining up for review on a misty morning.

Once he stopped and looked back and saw that the grayness had closed in behind him. The houses were wiped out, the sidewalk faded into nothing.

He shouted, hoping to attract attention. But his voice frightened him. It seemed to ricochet up and into the higher levels of the sky, as if a giant door had been opened to a mighty room high above him.

He went on until he came to the corner of Lexington. There, on the curb, he stopped and stared. The gray wall was thicker there but he did not realize how close it was until he glanced down at his feet and saw there was nothing, nothing at all beyond the curbside. No dull gleam of wet asphalt, no sign of a street. It was as if all eternity ended here at the corner of Maple and Lexington.

With a wild cry, Mr. Chambers turned and ran. Back down the street he raced, coat streaming after him in the wind, bowler hat bouncing on his head.

Panting, he reached the gate and stumbled up the walk, thankful that it still was there.

On the stoop he stood for a moment, breathing hard. He glanced back over his shoulder and a queer feeling of inner numbness seemed to well over him. At that moment the gray nothingness appeared to thin ... the enveloping curtain fell away, and he saw....

Vague and indistinct, yet cast in stereoscopic outline, a gigantic city was lined against the darkling sky. It was a city fantastic with cubed domes, spires, and aerial bridges and flying buttresses. Tunnel-like streets, flanked on either side by shining metallic ramps and runways, stretched endlessly to the vanishing point. Great shafts of multicolored light probed huge streamers and ellipses above the higher levels.

And beyond, like a final backdrop, rose a titanic wall. It was from that wall ... from its crenelated parapets and battlements that Mr. Chambers felt the eyes peering at him.

Thousands of eyes glaring down with but a single purpose.
And as he continued to look, something else seemed to take form above that wall. A design this time, that
swirled and writhed in the ribbons of radiance and rapidly coalesced into strange geometric features, without definite
line or detail. A colossal face, a face of indescribable power and evil, it was, staring down with malevolent
compasure.

* * * * *

Then the city and the face slid out of focus; the vision faded like a darkened magic-lantern, and the grayness
moved in again.

Mr. Chambers pushed open the door of his house. But he did not lock it. There was no need of locks ... not any
more.

A few coals of fire still smouldered in the grate and going there, he stirred them up, raked away the ash, piled
on more wood. The flames leaped merrily, dancing in the chimney's throat.

Without removing his hat and coat, he sank exhausted in his favorite chair, closed his eyes then opened them
again.

He sighed with relief as he saw the room was unchanged. Everything in its accustomed place: the clock, the
lamp, the elephant ash tray, the marine print on the wall.

Everything was as it should be. The clock measured the silence with its measured ticking; it chimed abruptly
and the vase sent up its usual sympathetic vibration.

This was his room, he thought. Rooms acquire the personality of the person who lives in them, become a part
of him. This was his world, his own private world, and as such it would be the last to go.

But how long could he ... his brain ... maintain its existence?

Mr. Chambers stared at the marine print and for a moment a little breath of reassurance returned to him. They
couldn't take this away. The rest of the world might dissolve because there was insufficient power of thought to
retain its outward form.

But this room was his. He alone had furnished it. He alone, since he had first planned the house's building, had
lived here.

This room would stay. It must stay on ... it must....

He rose from his chair and walked across the room to the book case, stood staring at the second shelf with its
single volume. His eyes shifted to the top shelf and swift terror gripped him.

For all the books weren't there. A lot of books weren't there! Only the most beloved, the most familiar ones.

So the change already had started here! The unfamiliar books were gone and that fitted in the pattern ... for it
would be the least familiar things that would go first.

Wheeling, he stared across the room. Was it his imagination, or did the lamp on the table blur and begin to fade
away?

But as he stared at it, it became clear again, a solid, substantial thing.

For a moment real fear reached out and touched him with chilly fingers. For he knew that this room no longer
was proof against the thing that had happened out there on the street.

Or had it really happened? Might not all this exist within his own mind? Might not the street be as it always
was, with laughing children and barking dogs? Might not the Red Star confectionery still exist, splashing the street
with the red of its neon sign?

Could it be that he was going mad? He had heard whispers when he had passed, whispers the gossiping
housewives had not intended him to hear. And he had heard the shouting of boys when he walked by. They thought
him mad. Could he be really mad?

But he knew he wasn't mad. He knew that he perhaps was the sanest of all men who walked the earth. For he,
and he alone, had foreseen this very thing. And the others had scoffed at him for it.

Somewhere else the children might be playing on a street. But it would be a different street. And the children
undoubtedly would be different too.

For the matter of which the street and everything upon it had been formed would now be cast in a different
mold, stolen by different minds in a different dimension.

Perhaps we shall come upon a day, far distant, when our plane, our world will dissolve beneath our feet and
before our eyes as some stronger intelligence reaches out from the dimensional shadows of the very space we live in
and wrests from us the matter which we know to be our own.

But there had been no need to wait for that distant day. Scant years after he had written those prophetic words
the thing was happening. Man had played unwittingly into the hands of those other minds in the other dimension.
Man had waged a war and war had bred a pestilence. And the whole vast cycle of events was but a detail of a
cyclopean plan.

He could see it all now. By an insidious mass hypnosis minions from that other dimension ... or was it one
supreme intelligence ... had deliberately sown the seeds of dissension. The reduction of the world's mental power had been carefully planned with diabolic premeditation.

On impulse he suddenly turned, crossed the room and opened the connecting door to the bedroom. He stopped on the threshold and a sob forced its way to his lips.

There was no bedroom. Where his stolid four poster and dresser had been there was greyish nothingness.

Like an automaton he turned again and paced to the hall door. Here, too, he found what he had expected. There was no hall, no familiar hat rack and umbrella stand.

Nothing....

Weakly Mr. Chambers moved back to his chair in the corner.

"So here I am," he said, half aloud.

So there he was. Embattled in the last corner of the world that was left to him.

Perhaps there were other men like him, he thought. Men who stood at bay against the emptiness that marked the transition from one dimension to another. Men who had lived close to the things they loved, who had endowed those things with such substantial form by power of mind alone that they now stood out alone against the power of some greater mind.

The street was gone. The rest of his house was gone. This room still retained its form.

This room, he knew, would stay the longest. And when the rest of the room was gone, this corner with his favorite chair would remain. For this was the spot where he had lived for twenty years. The bedroom was for sleeping, the kitchen for eating. This room was for living. This was his last stand.

These were the walls and floors and prints and lamps that had soaked up his will to make them walls and prints and lamps.

He looked out the window into a blank world. His neighbors' houses already were gone. They had not lived with them as he had lived with this room. Their interests had been divided, thinly spread; their thoughts had not been concentrated as his upon an area four blocks by three, or a room fourteen by twelve.

* * * * *

Staring through the window, he saw it again. The same vision he had looked upon before and yet different in an indescribable way. There was the city illumined in the sky. There were the elliptical towers and turrets, the cube-shaped domes and battlements. He could see with stereoscopic clarity the aerial bridges, the gleaming avenues sweeping on into infinitude. The vision was nearer this time, but the depth and proportion had changed ... as if he were viewing it from two concentric angles at the same time.

And the face ... the face of magnitude ... of power of cosmic craft and evil....

Mr. Chambers turned his eyes back into the room. The clock was ticking slowly, steadily. The greyness was stealing into the room.

The table and radio were the first to go. They simply faded away and with them went one corner of the room.

And then the elephant ash tray.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Chambers, "I never did like that very well."

Now as he sat there it didn't seem queer to be without the table or the radio. It was as if it were something quite normal. Something one could expect to happen.

Perhaps, if he thought hard enough, he could bring them back.

But, after all, what was the use? One man, alone, could not stand off the irresistible march of nothingness. One man, all alone, simply couldn't do it.

He wondered what the elephant ash tray looked like in that other dimension. It certainly wouldn't be an elephant ash tray nor would the radio be a radio, for perhaps they didn't have ash trays or radios or elephants in the invading dimension.

He wondered, as a matter of fact, what he himself would look like when he finally slipped into the unknown. For he was matter, too, just as the ash tray and radio were matter.

He wondered if he would retain his individuality ... if he still would be a person. Or would he merely be a thing?

There was one answer to all of that. He simply didn't know.

Nothingness advanced upon him, ate its way across the room, stalking him as he sat in the chair underneath the lamp. And he waited for it.

The room, or what was left of it, plunged into dreadful silence.

Mr. Chambers started. The clock had stopped. Funny ... the first time in twenty years.

He leaped from his chair and then sat down again.

The clock hadn't stopped.

It wasn't there.
There was a tingling sensation in his feet.

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THE WORLD BEHIND THE MOON
By Paul Ernst

Two intrepid Earth-men fight it out with the horrific monsters of Zeud's frightful jungles.

Like pitiless jaws, a distant crater opened for their ship. Helplessly, they hurtled toward it: helplessly, because they were still in the nothingness of space, with no atmospheric resistance on which their rudders, or stern or bow tubes, could get a purchase to steer them.

Professor Dorn Wichter waited anxiously for the slight vibration that should announce that the projectile-shaped shell had entered the new planet's atmosphere.

"Have we struck it yet?" asked Joyce, a tall blond young man with the shoulders of an athlete and the broad brow and square chin of one who combines dreams with action. He made his way painfully toward Wichter. It was the first time he had attempted to move since the shell had passed the neutral point--that belt midway between the moon and the world behind it, where the pull of gravity of each satellite was neutralized by the other. They, and all the loose objects in the shell, had floated uncomfortably about the middle of the chamber for half an hour or so, gradually settling down again; until now it was possible, with care, to walk.

"Have we struck it?" he repeated, leaning over the professor's shoulder and staring at the resistance gauge.

"No." Absently Wichter took off his spectacles and polished them. "There's not a trace of resistance yet."

They gazed out the bow window toward the vast disc, like a serrated, pock-marked plate of blue ice, that was the planet Zeud--discovered and named by them. The same thought was in the mind of each. Suppose there were no atmosphere surrounding Zeud to cushion their descent into the hundred-mile crater that yawned to receive them?

"Well," said Joyce after a time, "we're taking no more of a chance here than we did when we pointed our nose toward the moon. We were almost sure that was no atmosphere there--which meant we'd nose dive into the rocks at five thousand miles an hour. On Zeud there might be anything." His eyes shone. "How wonderful that there should be such a planet, unsuspected during all the centuries men have been studying the heavens!"

Wichter nodded agreement. It was indeed wonderful. But what was more wonderful was its present discovery: for that would never have transpired had not he and Joyce succeeded in their attempt to fly to the moon. From there, after following the sun in its slow journey around to the lost side of the lunar globe--that face which the earth has never yet observed--they had seen shining in the near distance the great ball which they had christened Zeud.

Astronomical calculations had soon described the mysterious hidden satellite. It was almost a twin to the moon; a very little smaller, and less than eighty thousand miles away. Its rotation was nearly similar, which made its days not quite sixteen of our earthly days. It was of approximately the weight, per cubic mile, of Earth. And there it whirled, directly in a line with the earth and the moon, moving as the moon moved so that it was ever out of sight beyond it, as a dime would be out of sight if placed in a direct line behind a penny.

Zeud, the new satellite, the world beyond the moon! In their excitement at its discovery, Joyce and Wichter had left the moon--which they had found to be as dead and cold as it had been surmised to be--and returned summarily to Earth. They had replenished their supplies and their oxygen tanks, and had come back--to circle around the moon and point the sharp prow of the shell toward Zeud. The gift of the moon to Earth was a dubious one; but the gift of a possibly living planet-colony to mankind might be the solution of the overcrowded conditions of the terrestrial sphere!

"Speed, three thousand miles an hour," computed Wichter. "Distance to Zeud, nine hundred and eighty miles. If we don't strike a few atoms of hydrogen or something soon we're going to drill this nearest crater a little deeper!"

Joyce nodded grimly. At two thousand miles from Earth there had still been enough hydrogen traces in the ether to give purchase to the explosions of their water-motor. At six hundred miles from the moon they had run into a sparse gaseous belt that had enabled them to change direction and slow their speed. They had hoped to find hydrogen at a thousand or twelve hundred miles from Zeud.

"Eight hundred and thirty miles," commented Wichter, his slender, bent body tensed. "Eight hundred miles--ah!"

A thrumming sound came to their ears as the shell quivered, imperceptibly almost, but unmistakably, at the
touch of some faint resistance outside in space.

"We've struck it, Joyce. And it's much denser than the moon's, even as we'd hoped. There'll be life on Zeud, my boy, unless I'm vastly mistaken. You'd better look to the motor now."

* * * * *

Joyce went to the water-motor. This was a curious, but extremely simple affair. There was a glass box, ribbed with polished steel, about the size and shape of a cigar box, which was full of water. Leading away from this, to the bow and stern of the shell, were two small pipes. The pipes were greatly thickened for a period of three feet or so, directly under the little tank, and were braced by bed-plates so heavy as to look all out of proportion. Around the thickened parts of the pipes were coils of heavy, insulated copper wire. There were no valves nor cylinders, no revolving parts: that was all there was to the "motor."

Joyce didn't yet understand the device. The water dripped from the tank, drop by drop, to be abruptly disintegrated, made into an explosive, by being subjected to a powerful magnetic field induced in the coils by a generator in the bow of the shell. As each drop of water passed into the pipes, and was instantaneously broken up, there was a violent but controlled explosion--and the shell was kicked another hundred miles ahead on its journey. That was all Joyce knew about it.

He threw the bow switch. There was a soft shock as the motor exhausted through the forward tube, slowing their speed.

"Turn on the outside generator propellers," ordered Wichter. "I think our batteries are getting low."

Joyce slipped the tiny, slim-bladed propellers into gear. They began to turn, slowly at first in the almost non-existent atmosphere.

"Four hundred miles," announced Wichter. "How's the temperature?"

Joyce stepped to the thermometer that registered the heat of the outer wall. "Nine hundred degrees," he said.

"Cut down to a thousand miles an hour," commanded Wichter. "Five hundred as soon as the motor will catch that much. I'll keep our course straight toward this crater. It's in wells like that, that we'll find livable air—if we're right in believing there is such a thing on Zeud."

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Joyce glanced at the thermometer. It still registered hundreds of degrees, though their speed had been materially reduced.

"I guess there's livable air, all right," he said. "It's pretty thick outside already."

The professor smiled. "Another theory vindicated. I was sure that Zeud, swinging on the outside of the Earth-moon-Zeud chain and hence traveling at a faster rate, would pick up most of the moon's atmosphere over a period of millions of years. Also it must have been shielded by the moon, to some extent, against the constant small atmospheric leakage most celestial globes are subject to. Just the same, when we land, we'll test conditions with a rat or two."

At a signal from him, Joyce checked their speed to four hundred miles an hour, then to two hundred, and then, as they descended below the highest rim of the circular cliffs of the crater, almost to a full stop. They floated toward the surface of Zeud, watching with breathless interest the panorama that unfolded beneath them.

They were nosing toward a spot that was being favored with the Zeudian sunrise. Sharp and clear the light rays slanted down, illuminating about half the crater's floor and leaving the cliff protected half in dim shadow.

The illuminated part of the giant pit was as bizarre as the landscape of a nightmare. There were purplish trees, immense beyond belief. There were broad, smooth pools of inky black fluid that was oily and troubled in spots as though disturbed by some moving things under the surface. There were bare, rocky patches where the stones, the long drippings of ancient lava flow, were spread like bleaching gray skeletons of monsters. And over all, rising from pools and bare ground and jungle alike, was a thin, miasmic mist.

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Sustained by the slow, steady exhaust of the motor, rising a little with each partly muffled explosion and sinking a little further in each interval, they settled toward a bare, lava strewn spot that appealed to Wichter as being a good landing place. With a last hiss, and a grinding jar, they grounded. Joyce opened the switch to cut off the generator.

"Now let's see what the air's like," said Wichter, lifting down a small cage in which was penned an active rat.

He opened a double panel in the shell's hull, and freed the little animal. In an agony of suspense they watched it as it leaped onto the bare lava and halted a moment....

"Seems to like it," said Joyce, drawing a great breath.

The rat, as though intoxicated by its sudden freedom, raced away out of sight, covering eight or ten feet at a bound, its legs scurrying ludicrously in empty air during its short flights.

"That means that we can dispense with oxygen helmets--and that we'd better take our guns," said Wichter, his
voice tense, his eyes snapping behind his glasses.

He stepped to the gun rack. In this were half a dozen air-guns. Long and of very small bore, they discharged a tiny steel shell in which was a liquid of his invention that, about a second after the heat of its forced passage through the rifle barrel, expanded instantly in gaseous form to millions of times its liquid bulk. It was the most powerful explosive yet found, but one that was beautifully safe to carry inasmuch as it could be exploded only by heat.

"Are we ready?" he said, handing a gun to Joyce. "Then--let's go!"

* * * * *

But for a breath or two they hesitated before opening the heavy double door in the side of the hull, savoring to the full the immensity of the moment.

The rapture of the explorer who is the first to set foot on a vast new continent was theirs, magnified a hundredfold. For they were the first to set foot on a vast new planet! An entire new world, containing heaven alone knew what forms of life, what monstrous or infinitesimal creatures, lay before them. Even the profound awe they had experienced when landing on the moon was dwarfed by the solemnity of this occasion; just as it is less soul stirring to discover an arctic continent which is perpetually cased in barren ice, than to discover a continent which is warmly fruitful and, probably, teeming with life.

Still wordless, too stirred to speak, they opened the vault-like door and stepped out--into a humid heat which was like that of their own tropical regions, but not so unendurable.

In their short stay on the moon, during which they had taken several walks in their insulated suits, they had become somewhat accustomed to the decreased weight of their bodies due to the lesser gravity, so that here, where their weight was even less, they did not make any blunders of stepping twenty feet instead of a yard.

Walking warily, glancing alertly in all directions to guard against any strange animals that might rush out to destroy them, they moved toward the nearest stretch of jungle.

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The first thing that arrested their attention was the size of the trees they were approaching. They had got some idea of their hugeness from the shell, but viewed from ground level they loomed even larger. Eight hundred, a thousand feet they reared their mighty tops, with trunks hundreds of feet in circumference; living pyramids whose bases wove together to make an impenetrable ceiling over the jungle floor. The leaves were thick and bloated like cactus growths, and their color was a pronounced lavender.

"We must take back several of those leaves," said Wichter, his scientific soul filled with cold excitement.

"I wish we could take back some of this air, too." Joyce filled his lungs to capacity. "Isn't it great? Like wine! It almost counteracts the effects of the heat."

"There's more oxygen in it than in our own," surmised Wichter. "My God! What's that!"

They halted for an instant. From the depths of the lavender jungle had come an ear shattering, screaming hiss, as though some monstrous serpent were in its death agony.

They waited to hear if the noise would be repeated. It wasn't. Dubiously they started on again.

"We'd better not go in there too far," said Joyce. "If we didn't come out again it would cost Earth a new planet. No one else knows the secret of your water-motor."

"Oh, nothing living can stand against these guns of ours," replied Wichter confidently. "And that noise might not have been caused by anything living. It might have been steam escaping from some volcanic crevice."

They started cautiously down a well defined, hard packed trail through thorny lavender underbrush. As they went, Joyce blazed marks on various tree trunks marking the direction back to the shell. The tough fibres exuded a bluish liquid from the cuts that bubbled slowly like blood.

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To the right and left of them were cup-shaped bushes that looked like traps; and that their looks were not deceiving was proved by a muffled, bleating cry that rose from the compressed leaves of one of them they passed. Sluggish, blind crawling things like three-foot slugs flowed across their path and among the tree trunks, leaving viscous trails of slime behind them. And there were larger things....

"Careful," said Wichter suddenly, coming to a halt and peering into the gloom at their right.

"What did you see?" whispered Joyce.

Wichter shook his head. The gigantic, two-legged, purplish figure he had dimly made out in the steamy dark, had moved away. "I don't know. It looked a little like a giant ape."

They halted and took stock of their situation, mechanically wiping perspiration from their streaming faces, and pondering as to whether or not they should turn back. Joyce, who was far from being a coward, thought they should.

"In this undergrowth," he pointed out, "we might be rushed before we could even fire our guns. And we're nearly a mile from the shell."

But Wichter was like an eager child.
"We'll press on just a little," he urged. "To that clear spot in front of us." He pointed along the trail to where sunlight was blazing down through an opening in the trees. "As soon as we see what's there, we'll go back."

With a shrug, Joyce followed the eager little man down the weird trail under the lavender trees. In a few moments they had reached the clearing which was Wichter's goal. They halted on its edge, gazing at it with awe and repulsion.

It was a circular quagmire of festering black mud about a hundred yards across. Near at hand they could see the mud heaving, very slowly, as though abysmal forms of life were tunneling along just under the surface. They glanced toward the center of the bog, which was occupied by one of the smooth black pools, and cried aloud at what they saw.

"Was that what we heard back a ways?" wondered Joyce.

"Probably," said Wichter. His eyes shone as he gazed at the nightmare shape. Impulsively he took a step toward the stirring mud.

"Don't be entirely insane," snapped Joyce, catching his arm.

"I must see it closer," said Wichter, tugging to be free.

"Then we'll climb a tree and look down on it. We'll probably be safer up off the ground anyway."

They ascended the nearest jungle giant--whose rubbery bark was so ringed and scored as to be as easy to climb as a staircase--to the first great bough, about fifty feet from the ground, and edged out till they hung over the rim of the quagmire. From there, with the aid of their binoculars, they expected to see the dying monster in every detail. But when they looked toward the pool it was not in sight!

"Were we seeing things?" exclaimed Wichter, rubbing his glasses. "I'd have sworn it was lying there!"

"It was," said Joyce grimly. "Look at the pool. That'll tell you where it went."

The black, secretive surface was bubbling and waving as though, down in its depths, a terrific fight were taking place.

"Something came up and dragged our ten-legged lizard down to its den. Then that something's brothers got onto the fact that a feast was being held, and rushed in. That pool would be no place for a before-breakfast dip!"

Wichter started to say something in reply, then gazed, hypnotized, at the opposite wall of the jungle. From the dense screen of lavender foliage stretched a glistening, scale-armored neck, as thick as a man's body at its thinnest point, which was just behind a tremendous-jawed crocodilian head. It tapered back for a distance of at least thirty feet, to merge into a body as big as that of a terrestrial whale, that was supported by four squat, ponderous legs.

Moving with surprising rapidity, the enormous thing slid into the mud and began ploughing a way, belly deep, toward the pool. Shapeless, slow-writhing forms were cast up in its wake, to quiver for a moment in the sunlight and then melt below the mud again.

One of the bloated, formless mud-crawlers was snapped up in the huge jaws with an abrupt plunge of the long neck, and the monster began to feed, hog-like, slobbering over the loathsome carcass.

Wichter shook his head, half in fanatical eagerness, half in despair. "I'd like to stay and see more," he said with a sigh, "but if that's the kind of creatures we're apt to encounter in the Zeudian jungle, we'd better be going at once--"

"Sh-h!" snapped Joyce. Then, in a barely audible whisper: "I think the thing heard your voice!"

The monster had abruptly ceased its feeding. Its head, thrust high in the air, was waving inquisitively from side to side. Suddenly it expelled the air from its vast lungs in a roaring cough--and started directly for their tree.

"Shoot!" cried Wichter, raising his gun.

Moving with the speed of an express train, the monster had almost got to their overhanging branch before they could pull the triggers. Both shells imbedded themselves in the enormous chest, just as the long neck reached up for them. And at once things began to happen with cataclysmic rapidity.

Almost with their impact the shells exploded. The monster stopped, with a great hole torn in its body. Then, dying on its feet, it thrust its great head up and its huge jaws crunched over the branch to which its two puny destroyers were clinging.

With all its dozens of tons of weight, it jerked in a gargantuan death agony. The tree, enormous as it was, shook
with it, and the branch itself was tossed as though in a hurricane.

There was a splintering sound. Wichter and Joyce dropped their guns to cling more tightly to the bole of the drooping branch that was their only security. The guns glanced off the mountainous body--and, with a last convulsion of the mighty legs, were swept underneath!

The monster was still at last, its insensate jaws yet gripping the bough. The two men looked at each other in speechless consternation. The shell a mile off through the dreadful jungle.... Themselves, helpless without their guns....

"Well," said Joyce at last. "I guess we'd better be on our way. Waiting here, thinking it over, won't help any. Lucky there's no night, for a couple of weeks at least, to come stealing down on us."

* * * * *

He started down the great trunk, with Wichter following close behind. Walking as rapidly as they could, they hurried back along the tunneled trail toward their shell.

They hadn't covered a hundred yards when they heard a mighty crashing of underbrush behind them. Glancing back, they saw tooth-studded jaws gaping cavernously at the end of a thirty-foot neck--little, dead-looking eyes glaring at them--a hundred-foot body smashing its way over the trap-bushes and through tangles of vines and down-drooping branches.

"The mate to the thing we killed back there!" Joyce panted. "Run, for God's sake!"

Wichter needed no urging. He hadn't an ounce of fear in his spare, small body. But he had an overwhelming desire to get back to Earth and deliver his message. He was trembling as he raced after Joyce, thirty feet to a bound, ducking his head to avoid hitting the thick lavendar foliage that roofed the trail.

"One of us must get through!" he panted over and over. "One of us must make it!"

It was speedily apparent that they could never outrun their pursuer. The reaching jaws were only a few yards behind them now.

"You go," called Joyce, sobbing for breath. He slowed his pace deliberately.

"No--you--" Wichter slowed too. In a frenzy, Joyce shoved him along the trail.

"I tell you--"

He got no further. In front of them, where there had appeared to be solid ground, they suddenly saw a yawning pit. Desperately, they tried to veer aside, but they were too close. Their last long birdlike leap carried them over the edge. They fell, far down, into a deep chasm, splashing into a shallow pool of water.

A few clods of earth cascaded after them as the monster above dug its great splay feet into the ground and checked its rush in time to keep from falling after them. Then the top of the pit slowly darkened as a covering of some sort slid across it. They were in a prison as profoundly quiet and utterly black as a tomb.

* * * * *

"Dorn," shouted Joyce. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," came a voice in the near darkness. "And you?"

"I'm still in one piece as far as I can feel." There was a splashing noise. He waded toward it and in a moment his outstretched hand touched the professor's shoulder.

"This is a fine mess," he observed shakily. "We got away from those tooth-lined jaws, all right, but I'm wondering if we're much better off than we would have been if we hadn't escaped."

"I'm wondering the same thing," Wichter's voice was strained. "Did you see the way the top of the pit closed above us? That means we're in a trap. And a most ingenious trap it is, too! The roof of it is camouflaged until it looks exactly like the rest of the trail floor. The water in here is just shallow enough to let large animals break their necks when they fall in and just deep enough to preserve small animals--like ourselves--alive. We're in the hands of some sort of reasoning, intelligent beings, Joyce!"

"In that case," said Joyce with a shudder, "we'd better do our best to get out of here!"

But this was found to be impossible. They couldn't climb up out of the pit, and nowhere could they feel any openings in the walls. Only smooth, impenetrable stone met their questing fingers.

"It looks as though we're in to stay," said Joyce finally. "At least until our Zeudian hosts, whatever kind of creatures they may be, come and take us out. What'll we do then? Sail in and die fighting? Or go peaceably along with them--assuming we aren't killed at once--on the chance that we can make a break later?"

"I'd advise the latter," answered Wichter. "There is a small animal on our own planet whose example might be a good one for us to follow. That's the 'possum.' He stopped abruptly, and gripped Joyce's arm.

From the opposite side of the pit came a grating sound. A crack of greenish light appeared, low down near the water. This widened jerkily as though a door were being hoisted by some sort of pulley arrangement. The walls of the pit began to glow faintly with reflected light.

"Down," breathed Wichter.
Noiselessly they let themselves sink into the water until they were floating, eyes closed and motionless, on the surface. Playing dead to the best of their ability, they waited for what might happen next.

They heard a splashing near the open rock door. The splashing neared them, and high-pitched hissing syllables came to their ears—variegated sounds that resembled excited conversation in some unknown language.

Joyce felt himself touched by something, and it was all he could do to keep from shouting aloud and springing to his feet at the contact.

He'd had no idea, of course, what might be the nature of their captors, but he had imagined them as man-like, to some extent at least. And the touch of his hand, or flipper, or whatever it was, indicated that they were not!

They were cold-blooded, reptilian things, for the flesh that had touched him was cold; as clammy and repulsive as the belly of a dead fish. So repulsive was that flesh that, when he presently felt himself lifted high up and roughly carried, he shuddered in spite of himself at the contact.

Instantly the thing that bore him stopped. Joyce held his breath. He felt an excruciating, stabbing pain in his arm, after which the journey through the water was resumed. Stubbornly he kept up his pretence of lifelessness.

The splashing ceased, and he heard flat wet feet slapping along on dry rock, indicating that they had emerged from the pit. Then he sank into real unconsciousness.

The next thing he knew was that he was lying on smooth, bare rock in a perfect bedlam of noises. Howls and grunts, snuffling coughs and snarls beat at his ear-drums. It was as though he had fallen into a vast cage in which were hundreds of savage, excited animals—animals, however, that in spite of their excitement and ferocity were surprisingly motionless, for he heard no scraping of claws, or padding of feet.

Cautiously he opened his eyes....

He was in a large cave, the walls of which were glowing with greenish, phosphorescent light. Strewn about the floor were seemingly dead carcasses of animals. And what carcasses there were! Blubber-coated things that looked like giant tadpoles, gazelle-like creatures with a single, long slim horn growing from delicate small skulls, four-legged beasts and six-legged ones, animals with furry hides and crawlers with scaled coverings—several hundred assorted specimens of the smaller life of Zeud lay stretched out in seeming lifelessness.

But they were not dead, these bizarre beasts of another world. They lived, and were animated with the frenzied fear of trapped things. Joyce could see the tortured heaving of their furred and scaled sides as they panted with terror. And from their throats issued the outlandish noises he had heard. They were alive enough—only they seemed unable to move!

There was nothing in his range of vision that might conceivably be the beings that had captured them, so Joyce started to lift his head and look around at the rest of the cavern. He found that he could not move. He tried again, and his body was as unresponsive as a log. In fact, he couldn't feel his body at all! In growing terror, he concentrated all his will on moving his arm. It was as limp as a rag.

He relaxed, momentarily in the grip of stark, blind panic. He was as helpless as the howling things around him! He was numbed, completely paralyzed into immobility!

The professor's voice—a weak, uncertain voice—sounded from behind him. "Joyce! Joyce!"

He found that he could talk, that the paralysis that gripped the rest of his muscles had not extended to the vocal cords. "Dorn! Thank God you're alive! I couldn't see you, and I thought—"

"I'm alive, but that's about all," said Wichter. "I--I can't move."

"Neither can I. We've been drugged in some manner—just as all the other animals in here have been drugged. I must have got my dose in the pit. I was cut, or stabbed, in the arm."

Joyce stopped talking as he suddenly heard steps, like human footsteps yet weirdly different—flap-flapping sounds as though awkward flippers were slapping along the rock floor toward them. The steps stopped within a few feet of them; then, after what seemed hours, they sounded again, this time in front of him.

He opened his eyes, cautiously, barely moving his eyelids, and saw at last, in every hideous detail, one of the super-beasts that had captured Wichter and himself.

It was a horrible cartoon of a man, the thing that stood there in the greenish glow of the cave. Nine or ten feet high, it loomed; hairless, with a faintly iridescent, purplish hide. A thick, cylindrical trunk sloped into a neck only a little smaller than the body itself. Set on this was a bony, ugly head that was split clear across by lipless jaws. There was no nose, only slanted holes like the nostrils of an animal; and over these were set pale, expressionless, pupil-less eyes. The arms were short and thick and ended in bifurcated lumps of flesh like swollen hands encased in old-fashioned mittens. The legs were also grotesquely short, and the feet mere shapeless flaps.

It was standing near one of the smaller animals, apparently regarding it closely. Observing it himself, Joyce
saw that it was moving a little. As though coming out of a coma, it was raising its bizarre head and trying to get on its feet.

Leisurely the two-legged monster bent over it. Two long fangs gleamed in the lipless mouth. These were buried in the neck of the reviving beast—and instantly it sank back into immobility.

Having reduced it to helplessness—the monster ate it! The lipless jaws gaped widely. The shapeless hands forced in the head of the animal. The throat muscles expanded hugely: and in less than a minute it had swallowed its living prey as a boa-constrictor swallows a monkey.

Joyce closed his eyes, feeling weak and nauseated. He didn't open them again till long after he had heard the last of the awkward, flapping footsteps.

"Could you see it?" asked Wichter, who was lying so closely behind him that he couldn't observe the monstrous Zeudian. "What did it do? What was it like?"

Joyce told him of the way the creature had fed. "We are evidently in their provision room," he concluded. "They keep some of their food alive, it seems.... Well, it's a quick death."

"Tell me more about the way the other animal moved, just before it was eaten."

"There isn't much to tell," said Joyce wearily. "It didn't move long after those fangs were sunk into it."

"But don't you see!" There was sudden hope in Wichter's voice. "That means that the effect of the poison, which is apparently injected by those fangs, wears off after a time. And in that case—"

"In that case," Joyce interjected, "we'd have only an unknown army of ten-foot Zeudians, the problem of finding a way to the surface of the ground again, and the lack of any kind of weapons, to keep us from escaping!"

"We're not quite weaponless, though," the professor whispered back. "Over in a corner there's a pile of the long, slender horns that sprout from the heads of some of these creatures. Evidently the Zeudians cut them out, or break them off before eating that particular type of animal. They'd be as good as lances, if we could get hold of them."

Joyce said nothing, but hope began to beat in his own breast. He had noticed a significant happening during the age-long hours in the commissary cave. Most of the Zeudians had entered from the direction of the pit. But one had come in through an opening in the opposite side. And this one had blinked pale eyes as though dazzled from bright sunlight—and was bearing some large, woody looking tubers that seemed to have been freshly uprooted! There was a good chance, thought Joyce, that that opening led to a tunnel up to the world above!

He drew a deep breath—and felt a dim pain in his back, caused by the cramping position in which he had lain for so long.

He could have shouted aloud with the thrill of that discovery. This was the first time he had felt his body at all! Did it mean that the effect of the poison was wearing off—that it wasn't as lastingly paralyzing to his earthly nerve centers as to those of Zeudian creatures around them? He flexed the muscles of his leg. The leg moved a fraction of an inch.

"Dorn!" he called softly, "I can move a little! Can you?"

"Yes," Wichter answered, "I've been able to wriggle my fingers for several minutes. I think I could walk in an hour or two."

"Then pray for that hour or two. It might mean our escape!" Joyce told him of the seldom used entrance that he thought led to the open air. "I'm sure it goes to the surface, Dorn. Those woody looking tubers had been freshly picked."

Three of the two-legged monsters came in just then. They relapsed into lifeless silence. There was a horrible moment as the three paused over them longer than any of the others had. Was it obvious that the effects of the numbing poison was wearing off? Would they be bitten again—or eaten?

The Zeudians finally moved on, hissing and clicking to each other. Eventually the cold-blooded things fed, and dragged lethargically out of the cave in the direction of the pit.

With every passing minute Joyce could feel life pouring back into his numbed body. His cramped muscles were in agony now—a pain that gave him fierce pleasure. At last, risking observation, he lifted his head and then struggled to a sitting position and looked around.

No Zeudian was in sight. Evidently they were too sure of their poison glands to post a guard over them. He listened intently, and could hear no dragging footsteps. He turned to Wichter, who had followed his example and was sitting up, feebly rubbing his body to restore circulation.

"Now's our chance," he whispered. "Stand up and walk a little to steady your legs, while I go over and get us a couple of those sharp horns. Then we'll see where that entrance of mine goes!"

He walked to the pile of bones and horns in the corner and selected two of the longest and slimmest of the
ivory-like things. Just as he had rejoined Wichter he heard the sound with which he was now so grimly familiar—flapping, awkward footsteps. Wildly he signaled the professor. They dropped in their tracks, just as the approaching monster stumped into the cave.

* * * * *

For an instant he dared hope that their movement had gone unobserved, but his hope was rudely shattered. He heard a sharp hiss: heard the Zeudian flap toward them at double-quick time. Abandoning all pretense, he sprang to his feet just as the thing reached him, its fangs gleaming wickedly in the greenish light.

He leaped to the side, going twenty feet or more with the press of his Earth muscles against the reduced gravity. The creature rushed on toward the professor. That game little man crouched and awaited its onslaught. But Joyce had sprung back again before the two could clash.

He raised the long horn and plunged it into the smooth, purplish back. Again and again he drove it home, as the monster writhed under him. It had enormous vitality. Gashed and dripping, it yet struggled on, attempting to encircle Joyce with its stubby arms. Once it succeeded, and he felt his ribs crack as it contracted its powerful body. But a final stroke finished the savage fight. He got up and, with an incoherent cry to Wichter, raced toward the opening on which they pinned their hopes of reaching the upper air.

Hissing cries and the thudding of many feet came to them just as they reached the arched mouth of the passage. But the cries, and the constant pandemonium of the paralysed animals died behind them as they bounded along the tunnel.

* * * * *

They emerged at last into the sunlight they had never expected to see again, beside one of the great lavender trees. They paused an instant to try to get their bearings.

"This way," panted Joyce as he saw, on a hard-packed path ahead of them, one of the trail-marks he had blazed. They followed it, toward their space shell. Fortunately they met none of the tremendous animals that infested the jungles; and their journey to the clearing in which the shell was lying was accomplished without accident.

"We're safe now," gasped Wichter, as they came in sight of the bare lava patch. "We can outrun them five feet to their one!"

They burst into the clearing—and halted abruptly. Surrounding the shell, stumping curiously about it and touching it with their shapeless hands, were dozens of the Zeudians.

"My God!" groaned Joyce. "There must be at least a hundred of them! We're lost for certain now!"

They stared with hopeless longing at the vehicle that, if only they could reach it, could carry them back to Earth. Then they turned to each other and clasped hands, without a word. The same thought was in the mind of each—to rush at the swarming monsters and fight till they were killed. There was absolutely no chance of winning through to the shell, but it was infinitely better to die fighting than be swallowed alive.

* * * * *

So engrossed were the Zeudians by the strange thing that had fallen into their province, that Joyce and Wichter got within a hundred feet of them before they turned their pale eyes in their direction. Then, baring their fangs, they streamed toward the Earth men, just as the pursuing Zeudians entered the clearing from the jungle trail.

The two prepared to die as effectively as possible. Each grasped his lace-like horn tightly. The professor mechanically adjusted his glasses more firmly on his nose....

With his move, the narrowing circle of Zeudians halted. A violent clamor broke out among them. They glared at the two, but made no further step toward them.

"What in the world—" began Wichter bewilderedly.
"Your glasses!" Joyce shouted, gripping his shoulder. "When you moved them, they all stopped! They must be afraid of them, somehow. Take them clear off and see what happens."

Wichter removed his spectacles, and swung them in his hand, peering near-sightedly at the crowding Zeudians. Their reaction to his simple move was remarkable! Hisses of consternation came from their lipless mouths. They faced each other uneasily, waving their stubby arms and covering their own eyes as though suddenly afraid they would lose them.

Taking advantage of their indecision, Joyce and Wichter walked boldly toward them. They moved aside, forming a reluctant lane. Some of the Zeudians in the rear shoved to close in on them, but the ones in front held them back. It wasn't until the two were nearly through that the lane began to strangle into a threatening circle around them again. The Zeudians were evidently becoming reassured by the fact that Wichter continued to see all right in spite of the little strange creature's alarming act of removing his eyes.

"Do it again," breathed Joyce, perspiration beading his forehead as the giants moved closed, their fangs tentatively bared for the numbing poison stroke.
Wichter popped his glasses on, then jerked them off with a cry, as though he were suffering intensely. Once more the Zeudians faltered and drew back, feeling at their own eyes.

"Run!" cried Joyce. And they raced for the haven of the shell.

The Zeudians swarmed after them, snarling and hissing. Barely ahead of the nearest, Joyce and Wichter dove into the open panel. They slammed it closed just as a powerful, stubby arm reached after them. There was a screaming hiss, and a cold, cartilaginous lump of flesh dropped to the floor of the shell--half the monster's hand, sheared off between the sharp edge of the door and the metal hull.

Joyce threw in the generator switch. With a soft roar the water-motor exploded into action, sending the shell far into the sky.

"When we return," said Joyce, adding a final thousand miles an hour to their speed before they should fly free of the atmosphere of Zeud, "I think we'd better come at the head of an army, equipped with air-guns and explosive bombs."

"And with glasses," added the professor, taking off his spectacles and gazing at them as though seeing them for the first time.

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**Contents**

**THERE IS A REAPER ...**

By Charles V. De Vet

Doctors had given him just one month to live. A month to wonder, what comes afterward? There was one way to find out--ask a dead man!

The amber brown of the liquor disguised the poison it held, and I watched with a smile on my lips as he drank it. There was no pity in my heart for him. He was a jackal in the jungle of life, and I ... I was one of the carnivores. It is the lot of the jackals of life to be devoured by the carnivore.

Suddenly the contented look on his face froze into a startled stillness. I knew he was feeling the first savage twinge of the agony that was to come. He turned his head and looked at me, and I saw suddenly that he knew what I had done.

"You murderer!" he cursed me, and then his body arched in the middle and his voice choked off deep in his throat.

For a short minute he sat, tense, his body stiffened by the agony that rode it--unable to move a muscle. I watched the torment in his eyes build up to a crescendo of pain, until the suffering became so great that it filmed his eyes, and I knew that, though he still stared directly at me, he no longer saw me.

Then, as suddenly as the spasm had come, the starch went out of his body and his back slid slowly down the chair edge. He landed heavily with his head resting limply against the seat of the chair. His right leg doubled up in a kind of jerk, before he was still.

I knew the time had come. "Where are you?" I asked.

This moment had cost me sixty thousand dollars.

Three weeks ago the best doctors in the state had given me a month to live. And with seven million dollars in the bank I couldn't buy a minute more.

I accepted the doctors' decision philosophically, like the gambler that I am. But I had a plan: One which necessity had never forced me to use until now. Several years before I had read an article about the medicine men of a certain tribe of aborigines living in the jungles at the source of the Amazon River. They had discovered a process in which the juice of a certain bush--known only to them--could be used to poison a man. Anyone subjected to this poison died, but for a few minutes after the life left his body the medicine men could still converse with him. The subject, though ostensibly and actually dead, answered the medicine men's every question. This was their primitive, though reportedly effective method of catching glimpses of what lay in the world of death.

I had conceived my idea at the time I read the article, but I had never had the need to use it--until the doctors gave me a month to live. Then I spent my sixty thousand dollars, and three weeks later I held in my hands a small bottle of the witch doctors' fluid.

The next step was to secure my victim--my collaborator, I preferred to call him.

The man I chose was a nobody. A homeless, friendless non-entity, picked up off the street. He had once been
an educated man. But now he was only a bum, and when he died he'd never be missed. A perfect man for my experiment.

I'm a rich man because I have a system. The system is simple: I never make a move until I know exactly where that move will lead me. My field of operations is the stock market. I spend money unstintingly to secure the information I need before I take each step. I hire the best investigators, bribe employees and persons in position to give me the information I want, and only when I am as certain as humanly possible that I cannot be wrong do I move. And the system never fails. Seven million dollars in the bank is proof of that.

Now, knowing that I could not live, I intended to make the system work for me one last time before I died. I'm a firm believer in the adage that any situation can be whipped, given prior knowledge of its coming--and, of course, its attendant circumstances.

* * * * *

For a moment he did not answer and I began to fear that my experiment had failed. "Where are you?" I repeated, louder and sharper this time.

The small muscles about his eyes puckered with an unnormal tension while the rest of his face held its death frost. Slowly, slowly, unnaturally--as though energized by some hyper-rational power--his lips and tongue moved. The words he spoke were clear. "I am in a ... a ... tunnel," he said. "It is lighted, dimly, but there is nothing for me to see." Blue veins showed through the flesh of his cheeks like watermarks on translucent paper.

He paused and I urged, "Go on."

"I am alone," he said. "The realities I knew no longer exist, and I am damp and cold. All about me is a sense of gloom and dejection. It is an apprehension--an emanation--so deep and real as to be almost a tangible thing. The walls to either side of me seem to be formed, not of substance, but rather of the soundless cries of melancholy of spirits I cannot see.

"I am waiting, waiting in the gloom for something which will come to me. That need to wait is an innate part of my being and I have no thought of questioning it." His voice died again.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked.

"I do not know," he said, his voice dreary with the despair of centuries of hopelessness. "I only know that I must wait--that compulsion is greater than my strength to combat."

The tone of his voice changed slightly. "The tunnel about me is widening and now the walls have receded into invisibility. The tunnel has become a plain, but the plain is as desolate, as forlorn and dreary as was the tunnel, and still I stand and wait. How long must this go on?"

He fell silent again, and I was about to prompt him with another question--I could not afford to let the time run out in long silences--but abruptly the muscles about his eyes tightened and subtly a new aspect replaced their hopeless dejection. Now they expressed a black, bottomless terror. For a moment I marveled that so small a portion of a facial anatomy could express such horror.

"There is something coming toward me," he said. "A--beast--of brutish foulness! Beast is too inadequate a term to describe it, but I know no words to tell its form. It is an intangible and evasive--thing--but very real. And it is coming closer! It has no organs of sight as I know them, but I feel that it can see me. Or rather that it is aware of me with a sense sharper than vision itself. It is very near now. Oh God, the malevolence, the hate--the potentiality of awful, fearsome destructiveness that is its very essence! And still I cannot move!"

The expression of terrified anticipation, centered in his eyes, lessened slightly, and was replaced, instantly, by its former deep, deep despair. "I am no longer afraid," he said.

"Why?" I interjected. "Why?" I was impatient to learn all that I could before the end came.

"Because ..." He paused. "Because it holds no threat for me. Somehow, someday, I understand--I know--that it too is seeking that for which I wait."

"What is it doing now?" I asked.

"It has stopped beside me and we stand together, gazing across the stark, empty plain. Now a second awful entity, with the same leashed virulence about it, moves up and stands at my other side. We all three wait, myself with a dark fear of this dismal universe, my unnatural companions with patient, malicious menace.

"Bits of ..." He faltered. "Of ... I can name it only aura, go out from the beasts like an acid stream, and touch me, and the hate, and the venom chill my body like a wave of intense cold."

"Now there are others of the awful breed behind me. We stand, waiting, waiting for that which will come. What it is I do not know."

I could see the pallor of death creeping steadily into the last corners of his lips, and I knew that the end was not far away. Suddenly a black frustration built up within me. "What are you waiting for?" I screamed, the tenseness, and the importance of this moment forcing me to lose the iron self-control upon which I have always prided myself. I knew that the answer held the secret of what I must know. If I could learn that, my experiment would not be in
vain, and I could make whatever preparations were necessary for my own death. I had to know that answer.

"Think! Think!" I pleaded. "What are you waiting for?"

"I do not know!" The dreary despair in his eyes, sightless as they met mine, chilled me with a coldness that I felt in the marrow of my being. "I do not know," he repeated. "I ... Yes, I do know!"

Abruptly the plasmatic film cleared from his eyes and I knew that for the first time, since the poison struck, he was seeing me, clearly. I sensed that this was the last moment before he left—for good. It had to be now!

"Tell me. I command you," I cried. "What are you waiting for?"

His voice was quiet as he murmured, softly, implacably, before he was gone.

"We are waiting," he said, "for you.

THE END

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**Contents**

**THEY TWINKLED LIKE JEWELS**

by Philip José Farmer

Crane didn't get the nice man's name—until it was far too late to do anything at all about it.

Jack Crane lay all morning in the vacant lot. Now and then he moved a little to quiet the protest of cramped muscles and stagnant blood, but most of the time he was as motionless as the heap of rags he resembled. Not once did he hear or see a Bohas agent, or, for that matter, anyone. The predawn darkness had hidden his panting flight from the transie jungle, his dodging across backyards while whistles shrilled and voices shouted, and his crawling on hands and knees down an alley into the high grass and bushes which fringed a hidden garden.

For a while his heart had knocked so loudly that he had been sure he would not be able to hear his pursuers if they did get close. It seemed inevitable that they would track him down. A buddy had told him that a new camp had just been built at a place only three hours drive away from the town. This meant that Bohas would be thick as hornets in the neighborhood. But no black uniforms had so far appeared. And then, lying there while the passionate and untiring sun mounted the sky, the bang-bang of his heart was replaced by a noiseless but painful movement in his stomach.

He munched a candy bar and two dried rolls which a housewife had given him the evening before. The tiger in his belly quit pacing back and forth; it crouched and licked its chops, but its tail was stuck up in his throat. Jack could feel the dry fur swabbing his pharynx and mouth. He suffered, but he was used to that. Night would come as surely as anything did. He'd get a drink then to quench his thirst.

Boredom began to sit on his eyelids. Just as he was about to accept some much needed sleep, he moved a leaf with an accidental jerk of his hand and uncovered a caterpillar. It was dark except for a row of yellow spots along the central line of some of its segments. As soon as it was exposed, it began slowly shimmying away. Before it had gone two feet, it was crossed by a moving shadow. Guiding the shadow was a black wasp with an orange ring around the abdomen. It closed the gap between itself and the worm with a swift, smooth movement and straddled the dark body.

Before the wasp could grasp the thick neck with its mandibles, the intended victim began rapidly rolling and unrolling and flinging itself from side to side. For a minute the delicate dancer above it could not succeed in clenching the neck. Its sharp jaws slid off the frenziedly jerking skin until the tiring creature paused for the chip of a second.

Seizing opportunity and larva at the same time, the wasp stood high on its legs and pulled the worm's front end from the ground, exposing the yellowed hand of the underpart. The attacker's abdomen curved beneath its own body; the stinger jabbed between two segments of the prey's jointed length. Instantly, the writhing stilled. A shudder, and the caterpillar became as inert as if it were dead.

Jack had watched with an eye not completely clinical, feeling the sympathy of the hunted and the hounded for a fellow. His own struggles of the past few months had been as desperate, though not as hopeless, and ... He stopped thinking. His heart again took up the rib-thudding. Out of the corner of his left eye he had seen a shadow that fell across the garden. When he slowly turned his head to follow the stain upon the sun-splashed soil, he saw that it clung to a pair of shining black boots.

Jack did not say anything. What was the use? He put his hands against the weeds and pushed his body up. He looked into the silent mouth of a .38 automatic. It told him his running days were over. You didn't talk back to a
mouth like that.

II

Jack was lucky. As one of the last to be herded into the truck, which had been once used for hauling cattle, he
had more room to breathe than most of the others. He faced the rear bars. The vehicle was heading into the sun. Its
rays were not as hard on him as on some of those who were so jam-packed they could not turn to get the hot yellow
splotch out of their eyes.

He looked through lowered lids at the youths on either side of him. For the last three days in the transie jungle,
the one standing on his left had given signs of what was coming upon him, what had come upon so many of the
transies. The muttering, the indifference to food, not hearing you when you talked to him. And now the shock of
being caught in the raid had speeded up what everybody had foreseen. He was hardened, like a concrete statue, into
a half-crouch. His arms were held in front of him like a praying mantis’, and his hands clutched a bar. Not even the
pressure of the crowd could break his posture.

The man on Jack’s right murmured something, but the roaring of motor and clashing of gears shifting on a hill
squashed his voice. He spoke louder:
"Cerea flexibilitas. Extreme catatonic state. The fate of all of us."
"You're nuts," said Jack. "Not me. I'm no schizo, and I'm not going to become one."

As there was no reply, Jack decided he had not moved his lips enough to be heard clearly. Lately, even when it
was quiet, people seemed to have trouble making out what he was saying. It made him mildly angry.

He shouted. It did not matter if he were overheard. That any of the prisoners were agents of the Bureau of
Health and Sanity didn't seem likely. Anyway, he didn't care. They wouldn't do anything to him they hadn't planned
before this.

"Got any idea where we're going?"

"Sure. F.M.R.C. 3. Federal Male Rehabilitation Camp No. 3. I spent two weeks in the hills spying on it."

Jack looked the speaker over. Like all those in the truck, he wore a frayed shirt, a stained and torn coat, and
greasy, dirty trousers. The black bristles on his face were long; the back of his neck was covered by thick curls. The
brim of his dusty hat was pulled down low. Beneath its shadow his eyes roamd from side to side with the same fear
that Jack knew was in his own eyes.

Hunger and sleepless nights had knobbed his cheekbones and honed his chin to a sharp point. An almost visible
air clung to him, a hot aura that seemed to result from veins full of lava and eyeballs spilling out a heat that could
not be held within him. He had the face every transie had, the face of a man who was either burning with fever or
who had seen a vision.

Jack looked away to stare miserably at the dust boiling up behind the wheels, as if he could see projected
against its yellow-brown screen his retreating past.

He spoke out of the side of his mouth. "What's happened to us? We should be happy and working at good jobs
and sure about the future. We shouldn't be just bums, hobos, walkers of the streets, rod-hoppers, beggars, and
thieves."

His friend shrugged and looked uneasily from the corners of his eyes. He was probably expecting the question
they all asked sooner or later: Why are you on the road? They asked, but none replied with words that meant
anything. They lied, and they didn't seem to take any pleasure in their lying. When they asked questions themselves,
they knew they wouldn't get the truth. But something forced them to keep on trying anyway.

Jack's buddy evaded also. He said, "I read a magazine article by a Dr. Vespa, the head of the Bureau of Health
and Sanity. He'd written the article just after the President created the Bureau. He viewed, quote, with alarm and
apprehension, unquote, the fact that six percent of those between the ages of twelve and twenty-five were
schizophrenics who needed institutionalizing. And he was, quote, appalled and horrified, unquote, that five percent
of the nation were homeless unemployed and that three point seven percent of those were between the ages of
fourteen and thirty. He said that if this schizophrenia kept on progressing, half the world would be in rehabilitation
camps. But if that occurred, the sane half would go to pot. Back to the stone age. And the schizos would die."

* * * * *

He licked his lips as if he were tasting the figures and found them bitter.

"I was very interested by Vespa's reply to a mother who had written him," he went on. "Her daughter ended up
in a Bohas camp for schizos, and her son had left his wonderful home and brilliant future to become a bum. She
wanted to know why. Vespa took six long paragraphs to give six explanations, all equally valid and all advanced by
equally distinguished sociologists. He himself favored the mass hysteria theory. But if you looked at his
gobbledygook closely, you could reduce it to one phrase, We don't know.

"He did say this—though you won't like it—that the schizos and the transies were just two sides of the same
coin. Both were infected with the same disease, whatever it was. And the transies usually ended up as schizos
anyway. It just took them longer."

Gears shifted. The floor slanted. Jack was shoved hard against the rear boards by the weight of the other men. He didn't answer until the pressure had eased and his ribs were free to work for more than mere survival.

He said, "You're way off, schizo. My hitting the road has nothing to do with those split-heads. Nothing, you understand? There's nothing foggy or dreamy about me. I wouldn't be here with you guys if I hadn't been so interested in a wasp catching a caterpillar that I never saw the Bohas sneaking up on me."

While Jack described the little tragedy, the other allowed an understanding smile to bend his lips. He seemed engrossed, however, and when Jack had finished, he said:

"That was probably an ammophila wasp. Sphex urnaria Klug. Lovely, but vicious, little she-demon. Injects the poison from her sting into the caterpillar's central nerve cord. That not only paralyzes but preserves it. The victim is always stowed away with another one in an underground burrow. The wasp attaches one of her eggs to the body of a worm. When the egg hatches, the grub eats both of the worms. They're alive, but they're completely helpless to resist while their guts are gnawed away. Beautiful idea, isn't it?"

"It's a habit common to many of those little devils: Sceliphron cementarium, Eumenes coarcta, Eumenes fraterna, Bembix spinolae, Pelopoeus ..."

Jack's interest wandered. His informant was evidently one of those transies who spent long hours in the libraries. They were ready at the slightest chance to offer their encyclopaedic but often useless knowledge. Jack himself had abandoned his childhood bookwormishness. For the last three years his days and evenings had worn themselves out on the streets, passed in a parade of faces, flickered by in plate-glass windows of restaurants and department stores and business offices, while he hoped, hoped....

"Did you say you spied on the camp?" Jack interrupted the sonorous, almost chanting flow of Greek and Latin.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. For two weeks. I saw plenty of transies trucked in, but I never saw any taken out. Maybe they left in the rocket."

"Rocket?"

The youth was looking straight before him. His face was hard as bone, but his voice trembled.

"Yes. A big one. It landed and discharged about a dozen men."

"You nuts? There's been only one man-carrying rocket invented, and it lands by parachute."

"I saw it, I tell you. And I'm not so nutty I'm seeing things that aren't there. Not yet, anyway!"

"Maybe the government's got rockets it's not telling anybody about."

"Then what connection could there be between rehabilitation camps and rockets?"

Jack shrugged and said, "Your rocket story is fantastic."

"If somebody had told you four years ago that you'd be a bum hauled off to a concentration camp, you'd have said that was fantastic too."

Jack did not have time to reply. The truck stopped outside a high, barbed wire fence. The gate swung open; the truck bounced down the bumpy dirt road. Jack saw some black-uniformed Bohas seated by heavy machine guns. They halted at another entrance; more barbed wire was passed. Huge Dobermann pinschers looked at the transies with cold, steady eyes. The dust of another section of road swirled up before they squeaked to a standstill and the engine turned off.

This time, agents began to let down the back of the truck. They had to pry the pitiful schizo's fingers loose from the wood with a crow-bar and carry him off, still in his half-crouch.

A sergeant boomed orders. Stiff and stumbling, the transies jumped off the truck. They were swiftly lined up into squads and marched into the enclosure and from there into a huge black barracks. Within an hour each man was stripped, had his head shaved, was showered, given a grey uniform, and handed a tin plate and spoon and cup filled with beans and bread and hot coffee.

Afterwards, Jack wandered around, free to look at the sandy soil underfoot and barbed wire and the black uniforms of the sentries, and free to ask himself where, where, wherewherewhere? Twelve years ago it had been, but where, where, where, was...?

III

How easy it would have been to miss all this, if only he had obeyed his father. But Mr. Crane was so ineffectual....

"Jackie," he had said, "would you please go outside and play, or stay in some other room. It's very difficult to discuss business while you're whooping and screaming around, and I have a lot to discuss with Mr.--"

"Yes, Daddy," Jack said before his father mentioned his visitor's name. But he was not Jack Crane in his game; he was Uncas. The big chairs and the divan were trees in his imaginative eyes. The huge easy chair in which Daddy's caller (Jack thought of him only as "Mister") sat was a fallen log. He, Uncas, meant to hide behind it in ambush.
Mister did not bother him. He had smiled and said in a shrill voice that he thought Jack was a very nice boy. He wore a light grey-green Palm Beach suit and carried a big brown leather briefcase that looked too heavy for his soda straw-thin legs and arms. He was queer-looking because his waist was so narrow and his back so humped. And when he took off his tan Panama hat, a white fuzz exploded from his scalp. His face was pale as the moon in daylight. His broad smile showed teeth that Jack knew were false.

But the queerest thing about him was his thick spectacles, so heavily tinted with rose that Jack could not see the eyes behind them. The afternoon light seemed to bounce off the lenses in such a manner that no matter what angle you looked at them, you could not pierce them. And they curved to hide the sides of his eyes completely.

Mister had explained that he was an albino, and he needed the glasses to dim the glare on his eyes. Jack stopped being Uncas for a minute to listen. He had never seen an albino before, and, indeed, he did not know what one was.

"I don't mind the youngster," said Mister. "Let him play here if he wants to. He's developing his imagination, and he may be finding more stimuli in this front room than he could in all of outdoors. We should never cripple the fine gift of imagination in the young. Imagination, fancy, fantasy--or whatever you call it--is the essence and mainspring of those scientists, musicians, painters, and poets who amount to something in later life. They are adults who have remained youths."

Mister addressed Jack, "You're the Last of the Mohicans, and you're about to sneak up on the French captain and tomahawk him, aren't you?"

Jack blinked. He nodded his head. The opaque rose lenses set in Mister's face seemed to open a door into his naked grey skull.

The man said, "I want you to listen to me, Jack. You'll forget my name, which isn't important. But you will always remember me and my visit, won't you?"

Jack stared at the impenetrable lenses and nodded dumbly.

Mister turned to Jack's father. "Let his fancy grow. It is a necessary wish-fulfillment play. Like all human young who are good for anything at all, he is trying to find the lost door to the Garden of Eden. The history of the great poets and men-of-action is the history of the attempt to return to the realm that Adam lost, the forgotten Hesperides of the mind, the Avalon buried in our soul."

Mr. Crane put his fingertips together. "Yes?"

"Personally, I think that some day man will realize just what he is searching for and will invent a machine that will enable the child to project, just as a film throws an image on a screen, the visions in his psyche.

"I see you're interested," he continued. "You would be, naturally, since you're a professor of philosophy. Now, let's call the toy a specterscope, because through it the subject sees the spectres that haunt his unconscious. Ha! Ha! But how does it work? If you'll keep it to yourself, Mr. Crane, I'll tell you something: My native country's scientists have developed a rather simple device, though they haven't published anything about it in the scientific journals. Let me give you a brief explanation: Light strikes the retina of the eye; the rods and cones pass on impulses to the bipolar cells, which send them on to the optic nerve, which goes to the brain ..."

"Elementary and full of gaps," said Jack's father.

"Pardon me," said Mister. "A bare outline should be enough. You'll be able to fill in the details. Very well. This specterscope breaks up the light going into the eye in such a manner that the rods and cones receive only a certain wavelength. I can't tell you what it is, except that it's in the visual red. The scope also concentrates like a burning-glass and magnifies the power of the light.

"Result? A hitherto-undiscovered chemical in the visual purple of the rods is activated and stimulates the optic nerve in a way we had not guessed possible. An electrochemical stimulus then irritates the subconscious until it fully wakes up.

"Let me put it this way. The subconscious is not a matter of location but of organization. There are billions of possible connections between the neurons of the cortex. Look at those potentialities as so many cards in the same pack. Shuffle the cards one way and you have the common workaday cogito, ergo sum mind. Reshuffle them, and, bingo! you have the combination of neurons, or cards, of the unconscious. The specterscope does the redealing. When the subject gazes through it, he sees for the first time the full impact and result of his underground mind's workings in other perspectives than dreams or symbolical behavior. The subjective Garden of Eden is resurrected. It is my contention that this specterscope will some day be available to all children.

"When that happens, Mr. Crane, you will understand that the world will profit from man's secret wishes. Earth will be a far better place. Paradise, sunken deep in every man, can be dredged out and set up again."

"I don't know," said Jack's father, stroking his chin thoughtfully with a finger. "Children like my son are too introverted as it is. Give them this psychological toy you suggest, and you would watch them grow, not into the outside world, but into themselves. They would fester. Man has been expelled from the Garden. His history is a long, painful climb toward something different. It is something that is probably better than the soft and flabby
Golden Age. If man were to return, he would regress, become worse than static, become infantile or even embryonic. He would be smothered in the folds of his own dreams."

"Perhaps," said the salesman. "But I think you have a very unusual child here. He will go much farther than you may think. Why? Because he is sensitive and has an imagination that only needs the proper guidance. Too many children become mere bourgeois ciphers with paunches and round 'O' minds full of tripe. They'll stay on earth. That is, I mean they'll be stuck in the mud."

"You talk like no insurance salesman I've ever met."

"Like all those who really want to sell, I'm a born psychologist," Mister shrilled. "Actually, I have an advantage. I have a Ph.D. in psychology. I would prefer staying at home for laboratory work, but since I can help my starving children--I am not joking--so much more by coming to a foreign land and working at something that will put food in their mouths, I do it. I can't stand to see my little ones go hungry. Moreover," he said with a wave of his long-fingered hand, "this whole planet is really a lab that beats anything within four walls."

"You spoke of famine. Your accent--your name. You're a Greek, aren't you?"

"In a way," said Mister. "My name, translated, means gracious or kindly or well-meaning." His voice became brisker. "The translation is apropos. I'm here to do you a service. Now, about these monthly premiums ..."

Jack shook himself and stepped out of the mold of fascination that Mister's glasses seemed to have poured around him. Uncas again, he crawled on all fours from chair to divan to stool to the fallen log which the adults thought was an easy chair. He stuck his head from behind it and sighted along the broomstick-musket at his father. He'd shoot that white man dead and then take his scalp. He giggled at that, because his father really didn't have any hairlock to take.

At that moment Mister decided to take off his specs and polish them with his breast-pocket handkerchief. While he answered one of Mr. Crane's questions, he let them dangle from his fingers. Accidentally, the lenses were level with Jack's gaze. One careless glance was enough to jerk his eyes back to them. One glance stunned him so that he could not at once understand that what he was seeing was not reality.

There was his father across the room. But it wasn't a room. It was a space outdoors under the low branch of a tree whose trunk was so big it was as wide as the wall had been. Nor was the Persian rug there. It was replaced by a close-cropped bright green grass. Here and there foot-high flowers with bright yellow petals tipped in scarlet swayed beneath an internal wind. Close to Mr. Crane's feet a white horse no larger than a fox terrier bit off the flaming end of a plant.

All those things were wonderful enough--but was that naked giant who sprawled upon a moss-covered boulder father? No! Yes! Though the features were no longer pinched and scored and pale, though they were glowing and tanned and smooth like a young athlete's they were his father's! Even the thick, curly hair that fell down over a wide forehead and the panther-muscled body could not hide his identity.

Though it tore at his nerves, and though he was afraid that once he looked away he would never again seize the vision, Jack ripped his gaze away from the rosy view.

The descent to the grey and rasping reality was so painful that tears ran down his cheeks, and he gasped as if struck in the pit of the stomach. How could beauty like that be all around him without his knowing it?

He felt that he had been blind all his life until this moment and would be forever eyeless again, an unbearable forever, if he did not look through the glass again.

He stole another hurried glance, and the pain in his heart and stomach went away, his insides became wrapped in a soft wind. He was lifted. He was floating, a pale red, velvety air caressed him and buoyed him.

He saw his mother run from around the tree. That should have seemed peculiar, because he had thought she was dead. But there she was, no longer flat-walking and coughing and thin and wax-skinned, but golden-brown and curvy and bouncy. She jumped at Daddy and gave him a long kiss. Daddy didn't seem to mind that she had no clothes on. Oh, it was so wonderful. Jack was drifting on a yielding and wine-tinted air and warmed with a wind that seemed to swell him out like a happy balloon....

Suddenly he was falling, hurtling helplessly and sickeningly through a void while a cold and drab blast gouged his skin and spun him around and around. The world he had always known shoved hard against him. Again he felt the blow in the solar plexus and saw the grey tentacles of the living reality reach for his heart.

Jack looked up at the stranger, who was just about to put his spectacles on the bridge of his long nose. His eyelids were closed. Jack never did see the pink eyes.

That didn't bother him. He had other things to think about. He crouched beside the chair while his brain tried to move again, tried to engulf a thought and failed because it could not become fluid enough to find the idea that would move his tongue to shriek, No! No! No!

And when the salesman rose and placed his papers in his case and patted Jack on the head and bent his opaque rose spectacles at him and said good-by and that he wouldn't be coming back because he was going out of town to
stay, Jack was not able to move or say a thing. Nor for a long time after the door had closed could he break through the mass that gripped him like hardened lava. By then, no amount of screams and weeping would bring Mister back. All his father could do was to call a doctor who took the boy’s temperature and gave him some pills.

IV

Jack stood inside the wire and bent his neck back to watch a huge black and silver oyster feel the dusk for a landing-field with its single white foot and its orange toes. Blindingly, lights sprang to attention over the camp.

When Jack had blinked his eyes back to normal, he could see over the flat half-mile between the fence and the ship. It lay quiet and glittering and smoking in the flood-beams. He could see the round door in its side swing open. A truck rumbled across the plain and pulled up beside the metal bulk. A very tall man stepped out of the cab and halted upon the running board, from which he seemed to be greeting the newcomers or giving them instructions. Whatever he was saying took so long that Jack lost interest.

Lately, he had not been able to focus his mind for any length of time upon anything except that one event in the past. He wandered around and whipped glances at his comrades’ faces, noting listlessly that their uniforms and shaved heads had improved their appearance. But nothing would be able to chill the feverishness of their eyes.

Whistles shrilled. Jack jumped. His heart beat faster. He felt as if the end of the quest were suddenly close. Somebody would be around the corner. In a minute that person would be facing him, and then ...

Then, he reflected, and sagged with a wave of disappointment at the thought, then there weren't any corners in this camp. He had reached the wall at the end of the alley. Why didn't he stop looking?

Sergeants lined the prisoners up four abreast preparatory to marching them into the barracks. Jack supposed it was time to turn in for the night. He submitted to their barked orders and hard hands without resentment. They seemed a long way off. For the ten thousandth time he was thinking that this need not have happened.

If he had been man enough to grapple with himself, to wrestle as Jacob did with the angel and not let loose until he had felled the problem, he could be teaching philosophy in a quiet little college, as his father did. He had graduated from high school with only average marks, and then, instead of going to college, as his father had so much wanted him to, he had decided he would work a year. With his earnings, he would see the world.

He had seen it, but when his money ran out he had not returned home. He had drifted, taking jobs here and there, sleeping in flop-houses, jungles, park benches, and freight cars.

When the newly created Bureau of Health and Sanity had frozen jobs in an effort to solve the transiency problem, Jack had refused to work. He knew that he would not be able to quit a job without being arrested at once. Like hundreds of thousands of other youths, he had begged and stolen and hidden from the local police and the Bohas.

Even though all those years of misery and wandering, he had not once admitted to himself the true nature of this fog-cottoned grail. He knew it, and he did not know it. It was patrolling the edge of his mind, circling a far-off periphery, recognizable by a crude silhouette but nameless. Any time he wanted to, he could have summoned it closer and said, You are it, and I know you, and I know what I am looking for. It is...? Is what? Worthless? Foolish? Insane? A dream?

Jack had never had the courage to take that action. When it seemed the thing was galloping closer, charging down upon him, he ran away. It must stay on the horizon, moving on, always moving, staying out of his grasp.

"All you guys, for'ard 'arch!"

Jack did not move. The truck from the rocket had come through a gate and stopped by the transies, and about fifty men were getting off the back.

The man behind Jack bumped into him. Jack paid him no attention. He did not move. He squinted at the group who had come from the rocket. They were very tall, hump-shouldered, and dressed in light grey-green Palm Beach suits and tan Panama hats. Each held a brown leather briefcase at the end of a long, thin arm. Each wore on the bridge of his long nose a pair of rose-colored glasses.

A cry broke hoarsely from the transies. Some of those in front of Jack fell to their knees as if a sudden poison had paralyzed their legs. They called names and stretched out open hands. A boy by Jack's side sprawled face-down on the sand while he uttered over and over again, "Mr. Pelopoeus! Mr. Pelopoeus!"

The name meant nothing to Jack. He did feel repulsed at seeing the fellow turn on his side, bend his neck forward, bring his clenched fists up against his chest, and jackknife his legs against his arms. He had seen it many times before in the transie jungles, but he had never gotten over the sickness it had first caused him.

He turned away and came almost nose to nose with one of the men from the rocket. He had put down his briefcase so it rested against his leg and taken a white handkerchief out of his breast pocket to wipe the dust from his lenses. His lids were squeezed shut as if he found the lights unbearable.

Jack stared and could not move while a name that the boy behind him had been crying out slowly worked its
way through his consciousness. Suddenly, like the roar of a flashflood that is just rounding the bend of a dry gulch, the syllables struck him. He lunged forward and clutched at the spectacles in the man's hand. At the same time he yelled over and over the words that had filled out the blank in his memory.

"Mr. Eumenes! Mr. Eumenes!"

A sergeant cursed and slammed his fist into Jack's face. Jack fell down, flat on his back. Though his jaw felt as if it were torn loose from its hinge, he rolled over on his side, raised himself on his hands and knees, and began to get up to his feet.

"Stand still!" bellowed the sergeant. "Stay in formation or you'll get more of the same!"

Jack shook his head until it cleared. He crouched and held out his hands toward the man, but he did not move his feet. Over and over, half-chanting, half-crooning, he said, "Mr. Eumenes! The glasses! Please, Mr. Eumenes, the glasses!"

The forty-nine Mr. Eumenae-and-otherwise looked incuriously with impenetrable rosy eyes. The fiftieth put the white handkerchief back in his pocket. His mouth opened. False teeth gleamed. With his free hand he took off his hat and waved it at the crowd and bowed.

His tilted head showed a white fuzzlike hair that shot up over his pale scalp. His gestures were both comic and terrifying. The hat and the inclination of his body said far more than words could. They said, Good-by forever, and bon voyage!

Then Mr. Eumenes straightened up and opened his lids.

At first, the sockets looked as if they held no eyeballs, as if they were empty of all but shadows.

Jack saw them from a distance. Mr. Eumenes-or-his-twin was shooting away faster and faster and becoming smaller and smaller. No! He himself was. He was rocketing away within his own body. He was falling down a deep well.

He, Jack Crane, was a hollow shaft down which he slipped and screamed, away, away, from the world outside. It was like seeing from the wrong end of a pair of binoculars that lengthened and lengthened while the man with the long-sought-for treasure in his hand flew in the opposite direction as if he had been connected to the horizon by a rubber band and somebody had released it and he was flying towards it, away from Jack.

Even as this happened, as he knew vaguely that his muscles were locking into the posture of a beggar, hands out, pleading, face twisted into an agony of asking, lips repeating his croon-chant, he saw what had occurred.

The realization was like the sudden, blinding, and at the same time clarifying light that sometimes comes to epileptics just as they are going into a seizure. It was the thought that he had kept away on the horizon of his mind, the thought that now charged in on him with long leaps and bounds and then stopped and sat on its haunches and grinned at him while its long tongue lolled.

Of course, he should have known all these years what it was. He should have known that Mr. Eumenes was the worst thing in the world for him. He had known it, but, like a drug addict, he had refused to admit it. He had searched for the man. Yet he had known it would be fatal to find him. The rose-colored spectacles would swing gates that should never be fully open. And he should have guessed what and who Mr. Eumenes was when that encyclopedic fellow in the truck had singsonged those names.

How could he have been so stupid? Stupid? It was easy! He had wanted to be stupid! And how could the Mr. Eumenes-or-otherwise have used such obvious giveaway names? It was a measure of their contempt for the humans around them and of their own grim wit. Look at all the double entendres the salesman had given his father, and his father had never suspected. Even the head of the Bureau of Health and Sanity had been terrifyingly blasé about it.

Dr. Vespa. He had thrown his name like a gauntlet to humanity, and humanity had stared idiotically at it and never guessed its meaning. Vespa was a good Italian name. Jack didn't know what it meant, but he supposed that it had the same meaning as the Latin. He remembered it from his high school class.

As for his not encountering the salesman until now, he had been lucky. If he had run across him during his search, he would have been denied the glasses, as now. And the shock would have made him unable to cry out and betray the man. He would have done what he was so helplessly doing at this moment, and he would have been carted off to an institution.

How many other transies had seen that unforgettable face on the streets, the end of their search, and gone at once into that state that made them legal prey of the Bohas?

That was almost his last rational thought. He could no longer feel his flesh. A thin red curtain was falling between him and his senses. Everywhere it billowed out beneath him and eased his fall. Everywhere it swirled and softened the outlines of things that were streaking by—a large tree that he remembered seeing in his living room, a naked giant, his father, leaning against it and eating an apple, and a delicate little white creature cropping flowers.

Yet all this while he lived in two worlds. One was the passage downwards towards the Garden of Eden. The other was that hemisphere in which he had dwelt so reluctantly, the one he now perceived through the thickening red
veil of his sight and other senses.

They were not yet gone. He could feel the hands of the black-clad officers lifting him up and laying him upon some hard substance that rocked and dumped. Every lurch and thud was only dimly felt. Then he was placed upon something softer and carried into what he vaguely sensed was the interior of one of the barracks.

Some time later—he didn't know or care when, for he had lost all conception or even definition of time—he looked up the deep everlengthening shaft of himself into the eyes of another Mr. Eumenes or Mr. Sphex or Dr. Vespa or whatever he called himself. He was in white and wore a stethoscope around his neck.

Beside him stood another of his own kind. This one wore lipstick and a nurse's cap. She carried a tray on which were several containers. One container held a large and sharp scalpel. The other held an egg. It was about twice the size of a hen's egg.

Jack saw all this just before the veil took on another shade of red and blurred completely his vision of the outside. But the final thickening did not keep him from seeing that Doctor Eumenes was staring down at him as if he were peering into a dusky burrow. And Jack could make out the eyes. They were large, much larger than they should have been at the speed with which Jack was receding. They were not the pale pink of an albino's. They were black from corner to corner and built of a dozen or so hexagons whose edges caught the light.

They twinkled.

Like jewels.

Or the eyes of an enormous and evolved wasp.

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Contents

WASTE NOT, WANT
BY DAVE DRYFOOS

Eat your spinach, little man! It's good for you. Stuff yourself with it. Be a good little consumer, or the cops will get you.... For such is the law of supply and demand!

Panic roused him—the black imp of panic that lived under the garish rug of this unfamiliar room and crawled out at dawn to nudge him awake and stare from the blank space to his left where Tillie's gray head should have been.

His fists clenched in anger—at himself. He'd never been the sort to make allowance for his own weakness and didn't propose to begin doing so now, at age eighty-six. Tillie'd been killed in that crash well over a year ago and it was time he got used to his widowerhood and quit searching for her every morning.

But even after he gave himself the bawling out, orientation came slowly. The surroundings looked so strange. No matter what he told himself it was hard to believe that he was indeed Fred Lubway, mechanical engineer, and had a right to be in this single bed, alone in this house his Tillie had never seen.

The right to be there was all wrong. He disliked the house and hated all its furnishings.

The cybernetic cooker in the kitchen; the magnetically-suspended divans in the living room; the three-dimensional color broadcasts he could so readily project to any wall or ceiling; the solartropic machinery that would turn any face of the pentagonal house into the sun or the shade or the breeze; the lift that would raise the entire building a hundred feet into the air to give him a wider view and more privacy—all left him dissatisfied.

They were new. None had been shared with Tillie. He used them only to the extent required by law to fulfill his duty as a consumer.

"You must change your home because of the change in your family composition," the Ration Board's bright young female had explained, right after Tillie's funeral. "Your present furnishings are obsolete. You must replace them."

"And if I don't?" He'd been truculent.

"I doubt we'd have to invoke the penalties for criminal underconsumption," she'd explained airily. "There are plenty of other possible courses of action. Maybe we'd just get a decision that you're prematurely senile and unable to care for yourself. Then you'd go to a home for the aged where they'd help you consume—with forced feedings and such."

So here he was, in this home-of-his-own that seemed to belong to someone else. Well, at least he wasn't senile, even if he did move a little slowly, now, getting out of bed. He'd warm up soon. All by himself. With no one's help.

And as far as these newfangled gadgets in the bathroom were concerned, he could follow any well-written set of directions. He'd scalded himself that time only because the printed instructions were so confusing.
He took a cold shower this time.

When the airtowel had finished blowing and he was half dry—not wholly dry because the machine wasn't adapted to people who took ice-cold showers—he went in to the clothing machine. He punched the same few holes in its tape that he put there every day, stood in the right place, and in due course emerged with his long, rawboned frame covered by magenta tights having an excessively baggy seat.

He knew the costume was neither pretty nor fashionable and that its design, having been wholly within his control when he punched the tape, revealed both his taste and his mood. He didn't care; there was no one in the world whom he wanted to impress.

He looked in the dressing room mirror not to inspect the tights but to examine his face and see if it needed shaving. Too late he remembered that twenty years had elapsed since the permanent depilatories were first invented and ten since he'd used one and stopped having to shave.

There were too many changes like that in this gadget-mad world; too many new ways of doing old things. Life had no stability.

He stalked into the kitchen wishing he could skip breakfast—anger always unsettled his stomach. But everyone was required to eat at least three meals a day. The vast machine-records system that kept track of each person's consumption would reveal to the Ration Board any failure to use his share of food, so he dialed Breakfast Number Three—tomato juice, toast, and coffee.

The signal-panel flashed "Under-Eating" and he knew the state machine-records system had advised his cybernetic cooker to increase the amount of his consumption. Chin in hands, he sat hopelessly at the kitchen table awaiting his meal, and in due course was served prunes, waffles, bacon, eggs, toast, and tea--none of which he liked, except for toast.

He ate dutifully nevertheless, telling himself he wasn't afraid of the ration-cops who were always suspecting him of underconsumption because he was the tall skinny type and never got fat like most people, but that he ate what the cooker had given him because his father had been unemployed for a long time during the depression seventy-five years before, so he'd never been able to bring himself to throw food away.

Failure to consume had in the old days been called "overproduction" and by any name it was bad. So was war—he'd read enough about war to be glad that form of consumption had finally been abolished.

Still it was a duty and not a pleasure to eat so much, and a relief to get up and put the dirty dishes into the disposal machine and go up topside to his gyro.

* * * * *

Disgustingly, he had a long wait before departure. After climbing into the gyro and transmitting his flight plan, he had to sit seething for all of fifteen minutes before the Mount Diablo Flight Control Center deigned to lift his remote-controlled gyro into the air. And when the signal came, ascent was so awkwardly abrupt it made his ears pop.

He couldn't even complain. The Center was mechanical, and unequipped to hear complaints.

It routed him straight down the San Joaquin Valley—a beautiful sight from fifteen thousand feet, but over-familiar. He fell asleep and awakened only when unexpectedly brought down at Bakersfield Field.

Above his instrument panel the printing-receiver said "Routine Check of Equipment and Documents. Not Over Five Minutes' Delay."

But it could take longer. And tardiness was subject to official punishments as a form of unproductiveness. He called George Harding at the plant.

Harding apparently had been expecting the call. His round bluff face wore a scowl of annoyance.

"Don't you ever watch the newscasts?" he demanded angrily. "They began this 'Routine Check' you're in at five this morning, and were broadcasting pictures of the resulting traffic jam by six. If you'd filed a flight plan for Santa Barbara and come on down the coast you'd have avoided all this."

"I'm not required to listen to newscasts," Fred replied tartly. "I own the requisite number of receivers and--"

"Now, listen, Fred," Harding interrupted. "We need you down here so hurry up!"

Fred heard him switch off and sat for a moment trembling with rage. But he ended by grinning wryly. Everyone was in the same boat, of course. For the most part, people avoided thinking about it. But he could now see himself as if from above, spending his life flitting back and forth between home and plant, plant and home; wracking his brain to devise labor-saving machines while at the plant, then rushing home to struggle with the need to consume their tremendous output.

Was he a man? Or was he a caged squirrel racing in an exercise-wheel, running himself ragged and with great effort producing absolutely nothing?

He wasn't going to do it any longer, by golly! He was going to--

"Good morning!" A chubby young man in the pea-green uniform of a ration-cop opened the door and climbed
uninvited into the cockpit. "May I check the up-to-dateness of your ship's equipment, please?"

Fred didn't answer. He didn't have to. The young officer was already in the manual pilot's seat, checking the secondary controls.

In swift routine he tried motor and instruments, and took the craft briefly aloft. Down again, he demanded Fred's papers.

The licenses that pertained to the gyro were in order, but there was trouble over Fred's personal documents: his ration-book contained far too few sales-validations.

"You're not doing your share of consuming, Oldtimer," the young cop said mildly. "Look at all these unused food allotments! Want to cause a depression?"

"No."

"Man, if you don't eat more than this, we'll have mass starvation!"

"I know the slogans."

"Yes, but do you know the penalties? Forced feeding, compulsory consumption--do you think they're fun?"

"No."

"Well, you can file your flight plan and go, but if you don't spend those tickets before their expiration dates, Mister, you'll have cause to regret it."

With a special pencil, he sense-marked the card's margins.

Fred felt that each stroke of the pencil was a black mark against him. He watched in apprehensive silence.

The young cop was also silent. When finished he wordlessly returned the identification, tipped his cap, and swaggered off, his thick neck red above his green collar.

Fred found he'd had more than enough of swaggering young men with beefy red necks. That added to his disgust with the constant struggle to produce and consume, consume and produce. Vague, wishful threats froze as determination: he absolutely wasn't going through any more of it.

He filed a flight plan that would return him to his home, and in due course arrived there.

The phone rang in his ears as he opened the cockpit. He didn't want to answer, and he stayed on the roof securing the gyro and plugging in its battery-charger. But he couldn't ignore the bell's insistent clamor.

When he went downstairs and switched on the phone, George Harding's round face splashed on the wall.

"Fred," he said, "when we talked a few hours ago, you forgot to say you were sick. I phoned to confirm that for the Attendance Report. Did this call get you out of bed?"

He could see it hadn't. Therefore Fred knew he must be recording the audio only, and not the video; trying to give him a break with the Attendance people and coach him on the most appeasing answers.

A well-meant gesture, but a false one. And Fred was fed up with the false. "I forgot nothing," he said bluntly.

"I'm perfectly well and haven't been near bed."

"Now, wait," George said hastily. "It's no crime to be sick. And--ah--don't say anything you wouldn't want preserved for posterity."

"George, I'm not going to play along with you," Fred insisted. "This business of producing to consume and consuming to produce has got me down. It's beyond all reason!"

"No, it isn't. You're an excellent mechanical engineer, Fred, but you're not an economist. That's why you don't understand. Just excuse me for a minute, and I'll show you."

He left the field of view. Fred waited incuriously for him to return, suddenly conscious of the fact that he now had nothing better to do with his time.

George was back in less than a minute, anyhow. "O.K.," he said briskly. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes. I just wanted to say that production is a form of consumption, too--even the production of machine-tools and labor-saving devices. So there's nothing inconsistent--"

"What are you trying to do?" Fred demanded. "Don't lecture me--I know as much econ as you do!"

"But you've got to come back to work, Fred! I want you to use your rations, put your shoulder to the wheel, and conform generally. The policing's too strict for you to try anything else, fella--and I like you too well to want to see you--"

"I don't need you to protect me, George," Fred said stiffly. "I guess you mean well enough. But goodbye." He switched off.

* * * * *

The silence struck him. Not a sound stirred the air in that lonely new house except the slight wheeze of his breathing.

He felt tired. Bone weary. As if all the fatigues of his eighty-six years were accumulated within him.

He stood by a window and stared blindly out. Everyone seemed to have been heckling him, shoving him around, making him change all his ways every minute. He didn't want to change. He didn't want to be forever
adapting to new gadgets, new fads, new ways of doing things.

He thought of the villages of India, substantially unchanged for three, four, five thousand years. The villagers had no money, so they couldn't be consumers. Maybe they had the natural way to live. Static. Also, frugally.

But no. It was too frugal, too static. He'd heard and read too much about the starvation, pestilence, peonage and other ills plaguing those Indian villagers. They didn't have life licked, either.

The Indians had not enough, the Americans, too much. One was as bad as the other.

And he was in the middle.

He left the window he'd been staring from unseeingly and walked to the foyer control-panel. There he pushed the button that would cause the house to rear a hundred feet into the air on its titanium-aluminum plunger.

Then he went back to the window to watch the ground recede. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He decided the sensation was an illusion—a part of his state of mind.

A young man's voice said, "Mr. Lubway, we need you."

That was a nice thing to hear, so Fred turned, ready to smile. He didn't smile. He was confronted by another ration-cop.

This one was a tall young man, dark and hefty. He seemed very kindly, in his official sort of way.

"Mr. George Harding sent me," he explained. "He asked us to look you up and see if we could help."

"Yes?"

"You seem to have been a little unhappy this morning. I mean—well—staring out that window while your house rises dangerously high. Mr. George Harding didn't like the mood you're in, and neither do I, Mr. Lubway. I'm afraid you'll have to come to the hospital. We can't have a valuable citizen like you falling out that window, can we?"

"What do you mean, 'valuable citizen'? I'm no use to anybody. There's plenty of engineers, and more being graduated every semester. You don't need me."

"Oh, yes, we do!" Shaking his head, the young ration-cop took a firm grip on Fred's right biceps. "You've got to come along with me till your outlook changes, Mr. Lubway."

"Now, see here!" Fred objected, trying unsuccessfully to twist free of the officer's grip. "You've no call to treat me like a criminal. Nor to talk to me as if I were senile. My outlook won't change, and you know it!"

"Oh, yes, it will! And since you're neither criminal nor senile, that's what has to be done.

"We'll do it in the most humane way possible. A little brain surgery, and you'll sit in your cage and consume and consume and consume without a care in the world. Yes, sir, we'll change your outlook!"

"Now, you mustn't try to twist away from me like that, Mr. Lubway. I can't let you go. We need every consumer we can get."

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YEAR OF THE BIG THAW
By Marion Zimmer Bradley

Mr. Emmett did his duty by the visitor from another world—never doubting the right of it.

You say that Matthew is your own son, Mr. Emmett?

Yes, Rev'end Doane, and a better boy never stepped, if I do say it as shouldn't. I've trusted him to drive team for me since he was eleven, and you can't say more than that for a farm boy. Way back when he was a little shaver so high, when the war came on, he was bounden he was going to sail with this Admiral Farragut. You know boys that age—like runaway colts. I couldn't see no good in his being cabin boy on some tarnation Navy ship and I told him so. If he'd wanted to sail out on a whaling ship, I 'low I'd have let him go. But Marthy—that's the boy's Ma— took on so that Matt stayed home. Yes, he's a good boy and a good son.

We'll miss him a powerful lot if he gets this scholarship thing. But I 'low it'll be good for the boy to get some leamin' beside what he gets in the school here. It's right kind of you, Rev'end, to look over this application thing for me.

Well, if he is your own son, Mr. Emmett, why did you write 'birthplace unknown' on the line here?

Rev'end Doane, I'm glad you asked me that question. I've been turnin' it over in my mind and I've jest about come to the conclusion it wouldn't be nohow fair to hold it back. I didn't lie when I said Matt was my son, because he's been a good son to me and Marthy. But I'm not his Pa and Marthy ain't his Ma, so could be I stretched the truth jest a mite. Rev'end Doane, it's a tarnation funny yarn but I'll walk into the meetin' house and swear to it on a stack
o'Bibles as thick as a cord of wood.

You know I've been farming the old Corning place these past seven year? It's good flat Connecticut bottom-land, but it isn't like our land up in Hampshire where I was born and raised. My Pa called it the Hampshire Grants and all that was King's land when his Pa came in there and started farming at the foot of Scuttock Mountain. That's Injun for fires, folks say, because the Injuns used to build fires up there in the spring for some of their heathen doodads. Anyhow, up there in the mountains we see a tarnal power of quare things.

You call to mind the year we had the big thaw, about twelve years before the war? You mind the blizzard that year? I heard tell it spread down most to York. And at Fort Orange, the place they call Albany now, the Hudson froze right over, so they say. But those York folks do a sight of exaggerating, I'm told.

Anyhow, when the ice went out there was an almighty good thaw all over, and when the snow run off Scuttock mountain there was a good-sized hunk of farmland in our valley went under water. The crick on my farm flowed over the bank and there was a foot of water in the cowshed, and down in the swimmin' hole in the back pasture wasn't nothing but a big gully fifty foot and more across, rushing through the pasture, deep as a lake and brown as the old cow. You know freshet-floods? Full up with sticks and stones and old dead trees and somebody's old shed floatin' down the middle. And I swear to goodness, Parson, that stream was running along so fast I saw four-inch cobblestones floating and bumping along.

I tied the cow and the calf and Kate—she was our white mare; you mind she went lame last year and I had to shoot her, but she was just a young mare then and skittish as all get-out—but she was a good little mare.

Anyhow, I tied the whole kit and caboodle of them in the woodshed up behind the house, where they'd be dry, then I started to get the milkpail. Right then I heard the gosh-awfullest screech I ever heard in my life. Sounded like thunder and a freshet and a forest-fire all at once. I dropped the milkpail as I heard Marthy scream inside the house, and I run outside. Marthy was already there in the yard and she points up in the sky and yelled, "Look up yander!"

We stood looking up at the sky over Shattuck mountain where there was a great big—shoot now, I d'no as I can call its name but it was like a trail of fire in the sky, and it was makin' the dangdest racket you ever heard, Rev'rend. Looked kind of like one of them Fourth-of-July skyrockets, but it was big as a house. Marthy was screaming and she grabbed me and hollered, "Hez! Hez, what in tunket is it?" And when Marthy cusses like that, Rev'rend, she don't know what she's saying, she's so scared.

I was plumb scared myself. I heard Liza—that's our young-un, Liza Grace, that got married to the Taylor boy. I heard her crying on the stoop, and she came flying out with her pinny all black and hollered to Marthy that the pea soup was burning. Marthy let out another screech and ran for the house. That's a woman for you. So I quietened Liza down some and I went in and told Marthy it weren't no more than one of them shooting stars. Then I went and did the milking.

But you know, while we were sitting down to supper there came the most awful grinding, screeching, pounding crash I ever heard. Sounded if it were in the back pasture but the house shook as if somethin' had hit it.

Marthy jumped a mile and I never saw such a look on her face.

"Hez, what was that?" she asked.

"Shoot, now, nothing but the freshet," I told her.

But she kept on about it. "You reckon that shooting star fell in our back pasture, Hez?"

"Well, now, I don't 'low it did nothing like that," I told her. But she was jittery as an old hen and it weren't like her nohow. She said it sounded like trouble and I finally quietened her down by saying I'd saddle Kate up and go have a look. I kind of thought, though I didn't tell Marthy, that somebody's house had floated away in the freshet and run aground in our back pasture.

So I saddled up Kate and told Marthy to get some hot rum ready in case there was some poor soul run aground back there. And I rode Kate back to the back pasture.

It was mostly uphill because the top of the pasture is on high ground, and it sloped down to the crick on the other side of the rise.

Well, I reached the top of the hill and looked down. The crick were a regular river now, rushing along like Niagary. On the other side of it was a stand of timber, then the slope of Shattuck mountain. And I saw right away the long streak where all the timber had been cut out in a big scoop with roots standing up in the air and a big slide of rocks down to the water.

It was still raining a mite and the ground was sloshy and squanchy under foot. Kate scrunched her hooves and got real balky, not likin' it a bit. When we got to the top of the pasture she started to whine and whicker and stamp, and no matter how loud I whoa-ed she kept on a-stamping and I was plumb scared she'd pitch me off in the mud. Then I started to smell a funny smell, like somethin' burning. Now, don't ask me how anything could burn in all that water, because I don't know.

When we came up on the rise I saw the contraption.
Rev'rend, it was the most tarnal crazy contraption I ever saw in my life. It was bigger nor my cowshed and it was long and thin and as shiny as Marthy's old pewter pitcher her Ma brought from England. It had a pair of red rods sticking out behind and a crazy globe fitted up where the top ought to be. It was stuck in the mud, turned halfway over on the little slide of roots and rocks, and I could see what had happened, all right.

The thing must have been—now, Rev'rend, you can say what you like but that thing must have flew across Shattuck and landed on the slope in the trees, then turned over and slid down the hill. That must have been the crash we heard. The rods weren't just red, they were red-hot. I could hear them sizzle as the rain hit 'em.

In the middle of the infernal contraption there was a door, and it hung all to-other as if every hinge on it had been wrenched halfway off. As I pushed old Kate alongside it I heard somebody hollering alongside the contraption. I didn't nohow get the words but it must have been for help, because I looked down and there was a man a-flopping along in the water.

He was a big fellow and he wasn't swimming, just thrashin' and hollering. So I pulled off my coat and boots and hove in after him. The stream was running fast but he was near the edge and I managed to catch on to an old tree-root and hang on, keeping his head out of the water till I got my feet aground. Then I hauled him onto the bank. Up above me Kate was still whinnying and raising Ned and I shouted at her as I bent over the man.

Wal, Rev'rend, he sure did give me a surprise—weren't no proper man I'd ever seed before. He was wearing some kind of red clothes, real shiny and sort of stretchy and not wet from the water, like you'd expect, but dry and it felt like that silk and India-rubber stuff mixed together. And it was such a bright red that at first I didn't see the blood on it. When I did I knew he were a goner. His chest were all stove in, smashed to pieces. One of the old tree-roots must have jabbed him as the current flung him down. I thought he were dead already, but then he opened up his eyes.

A funny color they were, greeny yellow. And I swear, Rev'rend, when he opened them eyes I felt he was readin' my mind. I thought maybe he might be one of them circus fellers in their flying contraptions that hang at the bottom of a balloon.

He spoke to me in English, kind of choky and stiff, not like Joe the Portygee sailor or like those tarnal dumb Frenchies up Canady way, but—well, funny. He said, "My baby—in ship. Get—baby ..." He tried to say more but his eyes went shut and he moaned hard.

I yelped, "Godamighty!" 'Scuse me, Rev'rend, but I was so blame upset that's just what I did say, "Godamighty, man, you mean there's a baby in that there dingfol contraption?" He just moaned so after spreadin' my coat around the man a little bit I just plunged in that there river again.

Rev'rend, I heard tell once about some tomfool idiot going over Niagary in a barrel, and I tell you it was like that when I tried crossin' that freshet to reach the contraption.

I went under and down, and was whacked by floating sticks and whirled around in the freshet. But somehow, I d'no how except by the pure grace of God, I got across that raging torrent and clumb up to where the crazy dingfol machine was sitting.

Ship, he'd called it. But that were no ship, Rev'rend, it was some flying dragon kind of thing. It was a real scarey lookin' thing but I clumb up to the little door and hauled myself inside it. And, sure enough, there was other people in the cabin, only they was all dead.

There was a lady and a man and some kind of an animal looked like a bobcat only smaller, with a funny-shaped rooster-comb thing on its head. They all—even the cat-thing—was wearing those shiny, stretchy clo'es. And they all was so battered and smashed I didn't even bother to hunt for their heartbeats. I could see by a look they was dead as a doornail.

Then I heard a funny little whimper, like a kitten, and in a funny, rubber-cushioned thing there's a little boy baby, looked about six months old. He was howling lusty enough, and when I lifted him out of the cradle kind of thing, I saw why. That boy baby, he was wet, and his little arm was twisted under him. That there flying contraption must have smashed down awful hard, but that rubber hammock was so soft and cushiony all it did to him was jolt him good.

I looked around but I couldn't find anything to wrap him in. And the baby didn't have a stitch on him except a sort of spongy paper diaper, wet as sin. So I finally lifted up the lady, who had a long cape thing around her, and I took the cape off her real gentle. I knew she was dead and she wouldn't be needin' it, and that boy baby would catch his death if I took him out bare-naked like that. She was probably the baby's Ma; a right pretty woman she was but smashed up something shameful.

So anyhow, to make a long story short, I got that baby boy back across that Niagary falls somehow, and laid him down by his Pa. The man opened his eyes kind, and said in a choky voice, "Take care—baby."

I told him I would, and said I'd try to get him up to the house where Marthy could doctor him. The man told me not to bother. "I dying," he says. "We come from planet—star up there—crash here—" His voice trailed off into a
language I couldn't understand, and he looked like he was praying.

I bent over him and held his head on my knees real easy, and I said, "Don't worry, mister, I'll take care of your little fellow until your folks come after him. Before God I will."

So the man closed his eyes and I said, Our Father which art in Heaven, and when I got through he was dead.

I got him up on Kate, but he was cruel heavy for all he was such a tall skinny fellow. Then I wrapped that there baby up in the cape thing and took him home and give him to Marthy. And the next day I buried the fellow in the south medder and next meetin' day we had the baby baptized Matthew Daniel Emmett, and brung him up just like our own kids. That's all.

All? Mr. Emmett, didn't you ever find out where that ship really came from?

Why, Rev'rend, he said it come from a star. Dying men don't lie, you know that. I asked the Teacher about them planets he mentioned and she says that on one of the planets—can't rightly remember the name, March or Mark or something like that—she says some big scientist feller with a telescope saw canals on that planet, and they'd hev to be pretty near as big as this-here Erie canal to see them so far off. And if they could build canals on that planet I d'no why they couldn't build a flying machine.

I went back the next day when the water was down a little, to see if I couldn't get the rest of them folks and bury them, but the flying machine had broke up and washed down the crick.

Marthy's still got the cape thing. She's a powerful saving woman. We never did tell Matt, though. Might make him feel funny to think he didn't really b'long to us.

But—but—Mr. Emmett, didn't anybody ask questions about the baby—where you got it?

Well, now, I'll 'low they was curious, because Marthy hadn't been in the family way and they knew it. But up here folks minds their own business pretty well, and I jest let them wonder. I told Liza Grace I'd found her new little brother in the back pasture, and o'course it was the truth. When Liza Grace growed up she thought it was jest one of those yams old folks tell the little shavers.

And has Matthew ever shown any differences from the other children that you could see?

Well, Rev'rend, not so's you could notice it. He's powerful smart, but his real Pa and Ma must have been right smart too to build a flying contraption that could come so far.

O'course, when he were about twelve years old he started reading folks' minds, which didn't seem exactly right. He'd tell Marthy what I was thinkin' and things like that. He was just at the pesky age. Liza Grace and Minnie were both a-courting then, and he'd drive their boy friends crazy telling them what Liza Grace and Minnie were a-thinking and tease the gals by telling them what the boys were thinking about.

There weren't no harm in the boy, though, it was all teasing. But it just weren't decent, somehow. So I tuk him out behind the woodshed and give his britches a good dusting just to remind him that that kind of thing weren't polite nohow. And Rev'rend Doane, he ain't never done it sence.
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