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(3/15) The Golden Age of Science Fiction Volume III: An Anthology of 50 Short Stories
Various

Series: 15 [3]
Published: 2010
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THE MAN WHO CAME EARLY
By Poul Anderson

Yes, when a man grows old he has heard so much that is strange there's little more can surprise him. They say the king in Mittagard has a beast of gold before his high seat, which stands up and roars. I have it from Filif Eriksson, who served in the guard down there, and he is a steady fellow when not drunk. He has also seen the Greek fire used, it burns on water.

So, priest, I am not unwilling to believe what you say about the White Christ— I have been in England and France myself, and seen how the folk prosper. He must be a very powerful god, to ward so many realms... and did you say that everyone who is baptized will be given a white robe? I would like to have one. They mildew, of course, in this cursed wet Iceland weather, but a small sacrifice to the houseelves should--No sacrifices? Come now! I'll give up horseflesh if I must, my teeth not being what they were, but every sensible man knows how much trouble the elves make if they're not fed.

... Well, let's have another cup and talk about it. How do you like the beer? It's my own brew, you know. The cups I got in England, many years back. I was a young man then... time goes, time goes. Afterward I came back and inherited this, my father's steading, and have not left it since. Well enough to go in viking as a youth, but grown older you see where the real wealth lies: here, in the land and the cattle.

Stoke up the fires, Hjalt! It's growing cold. Sometimes I think the winters are colder than when I was a boy. Thorbrand of the Salmondale says so, but he believes the gods are angry because so many are turning from them. You'll have trouble winning Thorbrand over, priest. A stubborn man. Myself I am open-minded, and willing to listen at least.

... Now then. There is one point on which I must correct you. The end of the world is not coming in two years. This I know.

And if you ask me how I know, that's a very long tale, and in some ways a terrible one. Glad I am to be old, and safely in the earth before that great tomorrow comes. It will be an eldritch time before the frost giants march... oh, very well, before the angel blows his battle horn. One reason I hearken to your preaching is that I know the White Christ will conquer Thor. I know Iceland is going to be Christian erelong, and it seems best to range myself on the winning side.

No, I've had no visions. This is a happening of five years ago, which my own household and neighbors can swear to. They mostly did not believe what the stranger told; I do, more or less, if only because I don't think a liar could wreak so much harm. I loved my daughter, priest, and after it was over I made a good marriage for her. She did not naysay it, but now she sits out on the ness-farm with her husband and never a word to me; and I hear he is ill pleased with her silence and moodiness, and spends his nights with an Irish concubine. For this I cannot blame him, but it grieves me.

Well, I've drunk enough to tell the whole truth now, and whether you believe it or not makes no odds to me. Here... you, girls!... fill these cups again, for I'll have a dry throat before I finish the telling.

It begins, then, on a day in early summer, five years ago. At that time, my wife Ragnhfld and I had only two unwed children still living with us: our youngest son Helgi, of seventeen winters, and our daughter Thorgunna, of eighteen. The girl, being fair, had already had suitors. But she refused them, and I am not a man who would compel his daughter. As for Helgi, he was ever a lively one, good with his hands but a breakneck youth. He is now serving in the guard of King Olaf of Norway. Besides these, of course, we had about ten housefolk—two Irish thralls, two
girls to help with the women's work, and half a dozen hired carles. This is not a small steading.

You have not seen how my land lies. About two miles to the west is the bay; the thorps at Reykjavik are about five miles south. The land rises toward the Long Jokull, so that my acres are hilly; but it's good hayland, and there is often driftwood on the beach. I've built a shed down there for it, as well as a boathouse.

There had been a storm the night before, so Helgi and I were going down to look for drift. You, coming from Norway, do not know how precious wood is to us Icelanders, who have only a few scrubby trees and must bring all our timber from abroad. Back there men have often been burned in their houses by their foes, but we count that the worst of deeds, though it's not unknown.

I was on good terms with my neighbors, so we took only hand weapons. I my ax, Helgi a sword, and the two carles we had with us bore spears. It was a day washed clean by the night's fury, and the sun fell bright on long wet grass. I saw my garth lying rich around its courtyard, sleek cows and sheep, smoke rising from the roof hole of the hall, and knew I'd not done so ill in my lifetime. My son Helgi's hair fluttered in the low west wind as we left the steading behind a ridge and neared the water. Strange how well I remember all which happened that day, somehow it was a sharper day than most.

When we came down to the strand, the sea was beating heavy, white and gray out to the world's edge. A few gulls flew screaming above us, frightened off a cod washed up onto the shore. I saw there was a litter of no few sticks, even a baulk of timber--from some ship carrying it that broke up during the night, I suppose. That was a useful find, though, as a careful man, I would later sacrifice to be sure the owner's ghost wouldn't plague me.

We had fallen to and were dragging the baulk toward the shed when Helgi cried out. I ran for my ax as I looked the way he pointed. We had no feuds then, but there are always outlaws.

This one seemed harmless, though. Indeed, as he stumbled nearer across the black sand I thought him quite unarmed and wondered what had happened. He was a big man and strangely clad -- he wore coat and breeches and shoes like anyone else, but they were of peculiar cut and he bound his trousers with leggings rather than thongs. Nor had I ever seen a helmet like his: it was almost square, and came down to cover his neck, but it had no nose guard; it was held in place by a leather strap. And this you may not believe, but it was not metal--yet had been cast in one piece!

He broke into a staggering run as he neared, and flapped his arms and croaked something. The tongue was none I had ever heard, and I have heard many; it was like dogs barking. I saw that he was clean-shaven and his black hair cropped short, and thought he might be French. Otherwise he was a young man, and good-looking, with blue eyes and regular features. From his skin I judged that he spent much time indoors, yet he had a fine manly build.

"Could he have been shipwrecked?" asked Helgi.

"His clothes are dry and unstained," I said; "nor has he been wandering long, for there's no stubble on his chin. Yet I've heard of no strangers guesting hereabouts."

We lowered our weapons, and he came up to us and stood gasping. I saw that his coat and the shirt behind was fastened with bonelike buttons rather than laces, and were of heavy weave. About his neck he had fastened a strip of cloth tucked into his coat. These garments were all in brownish hues. His shoes were of a sort new to me, very well cobbled. Here and there on his coat were bits of brass, and he had three broken stripes on each sleeve; also a black band with white letters, the same letters being on his helmet. Those were not runes, but Roman letters thus: MP. He wore a broad belt, with a small clublike thing of metal in a sheath at the hip and also a real club.

"Then he must be a warlock," muttered my carle Sigurd. "Why else all those tokens?"

"They may only be ornament, or to ward against witchcraft," I soothed him. Then, to the stranger. "I be Ospak Ullsson of Bollstead. What is your errand?"

He stood with his chest heaving and a wildness in his eyes. He must have run a long way. Then he moaned and sat down and covered his face.

"H--he's sick, best we get him to the house," said Helgi. His eyes gleamed--we see so few new faces here.

"No... no..." The stranger looked up. "Let me rest a moment."

He spoke the Norse tongue readily enough, though with a thick accent not easy to follow and with many foreign words I did not understand.

The other carle, Grim, hefted his spear. "Have vikings landed?" he asked.

"When did vikings ever come to Iceland?" I snorted. "It's the other way around--"

The newcomer shook his head, as if it had been struck. He got shakily to his feet "What happened?" he said.

"What happened to the city?"

"What city?" I asked reasonably,

"Reykjavik!" he groaned. "Where is it?"

"Five miles south, the way you came--unless you mean the bay itself," I said.

"No! There was only a beach, and a few wretched huts, and--"
"Best not let Hjalmar Broadnose hear you call his thorp that," I counseled.

"But there was a city!" he cried. Wildness lay in his eyes. "I was crossing the street, it was a storm, and there was a crash and then I stood on the beach and the city was gone!"

"He's mad," said Sigurd, backing away. "Be careful... if he starts to foam at the mouth, it means he's going berserk."

"Who are you?" babbled the stranger. "What are you doing in those clothes? Why the spears?"

"Somehow," said Helgi, "he does not sound crazed only frightened and bewildered. Something evil has happened to him."

"I'm not staying near a man under a curse!" yelped Sigurd, and started to run away.

"Come back!" I bawled. "Stand where you are or I'll cleave your louse-bitten head!"

That stopped him, for he had no kin who would avenge him; but he would not come closer. Meanwhile the stranger had calmed down to the point where he could at least talk evenly.

"Was it the aitchbomb?" He asked. "Has the war started?"

He used that word often, aitchbomb, so I know it now, though unsure of what it means. It seems to be a kind of Greek fire. As for the war, I knew not which war he meant, and told him so.

"There was a great thunderstorm last night," I added. "And you say you were out in one too. Perhaps Thor's hammer knocked you from your place to here."

"But where is here?" he replied. His voice was more dulled than otherwise, now that the first terror had lifted, "I told you. This is Hfflstead, which is on Iceland."

"But that's where I was!" he mumbled. "Reykjavik... what happened? Did the aitchbomb destroy everything while I was unconscious?"

"Nothing has been destroyed," I said.

"Perhaps he means the fire at Olafsvik last month," said Helgi.

"No, no, no!" He buried his face in his hands. After a while he looked up and said. "See here. I am Sergeant Gerald Roberts of the United States Army base on Iceland. I was in Reykjavik and got struck by lightning or something. Suddenly I was standing on the beach, and got frightened and ran. That's all. Now, can you tell me how to get back to the base?"

Those were more or less his words, priest. Of course, we did not grasp half of it, and made him repeat it several times and explain the words. Even then we did not understand, except that he was from some country called the United States of America, which he said lies beyond Greenland to the west, and that he and some others were on Iceland to help our folk against their enemies. Now this I did not consider a lie--more a mistake or imagining. Grim would have cut him down for thinking us stupid enough to swallow that tale, but I could see that he meant it.

Trying to explain it to us cooled him off. "Look here," he said, in too reasonable a tone for a feverish man, "perhaps we can get at the truth from your side. Has there been no war you know of? Nothing which--well, look here. My country's men first came to Iceland to guard it against the Germans... now it is the Russians, but then it was the Germans. When was that?"

Helgi shook his head. "That never happened that I know of," he said. "Who are these Russians?" He found out later that Gardariki was meant. "Unless," he said, "the old warlocks--"

"He means the Irish monks," I explained. "There were a few living here when the Norsemen came, but they were driven out. That was, hm, somewhat over a hundred years ago. Did your folk ever help the monks?"

"I never heard of them!" he said. His breath sobbed in his throat. "You... didn't you Icelanders come from Norway?"

"Yes, about a hundred years ago," I answered patiently. "After King Harald Fairhair took all the Norse lands and--"

"A hundred years ago!" he whispered. I saw whiteness creep up under his skin. "What year is this?"

We gaped at him. "Well, it's the second year after the great salmon catch," I tried.

"What year after Christ, I mean?" It was a hoarse prayer.

"Oh, so you are a Christian? Hm, let me think... I talked with a bishop in England once, we were holding him for ransom, and he said... let me see... I think he said this Christ man lived a thousand years ago, or maybe a little less."

"A thousand--" He shook his head; and then something went out of him, he stood with glassy eyes--yes, I have seen glass, I told you I am a traveled man--he stood thus, and when we led him toward the garth he went like a small child.

You can see for yourself, priest, that my wife Ragnhild is still good to look upon even in eld, and Thorgunna took after her. She was is tall and slim, with a dragon's hoard of golden hair. She being a maiden then, it flowed loose over her shoulders. She had great blue eyes and a small heart-shaped face and very red lips. Withal she was a
merry one, and kind-hearted, so that all men loved her. Sverri Snorrason went in viking when she refused and was slain, but no one had the wit to see that she was unlucky.

We led this Gerald Samsson—when I asked, he said his father was named Sam—we led him home, leaving Sigurd and Grim to finish gathering the driftwood. There are some who would not have a Christian in their house, for fear of witchcraft, but I am a broad-minded man and Helgi, of course, was wild for anything new. Our guest stumbled like a blind man over the fields, but seemed to wake up as we entered the yard. His eyes went around the buildings that enclosed it, from the stables and sheds to the smokehouse, the brewery, the kitchen, the bathhouse, the god-shrine, and thence to the hall. And Thorgunna was standing in the doorway.

Their gazes locked for a moment, and I saw her color but thought little of it then. Our shoes rang on the flagging as we crossed the yard and kicked the dogs aside. My two thralls paused in cleaning out the stables to gawp, until I got them back to work with the remark that a man good for naught else was always a pleasing sacrifice. That's one useful practice you Christians lack; I've never made a human offering myself, but you know not how helpful is the fact that I could do so.

We entered the hall and I told the folk Gerald's name and how we had found him. Ragnhild set her maids hopping, to stoke up the fire in the middle trench and fetch beer, while I led Gerald to the high seat and sat down by him. Thorgunna brought us the filled horns.

Gerald tasted the brew and made a face. I felt somewhat offended, for my beer is reckoned good, and asked him if there was aught wrong. He laughed with a harsh note and said no, but he was used to beer that foamed and was not sour.

"And where might they make such?" I wondered testily.
"Everywhere. Iceland, too—no..." He stared emptily before him. "Let's say... in Vinland."
"Where is Vinland?" I asked.
"The country to the west whence I came. I thought you knew... wait a bit—" He shook his head, "Maybe I can find out—have you heard of a man named Leif Eiriksson?"
"No," I said. Since then it has struck me that this was one proof of his tale, for Leif Eriksson is now a well-known chief; and I also take more seriously those tales of land seen by Bjarni Herjulfsson.

"His father, maybe Tfoilr the Red?" asked Gerald.
"Oh yes," I said. "If you mean the Norseman who came hither because of a manslaughter, and left Iceland in turn for the same reason, and has now settled with other folk in Greenland..."
"Then this is... a little before Leif's voyage," he muttered "The late tenth century."
"See here," demanded Helgi, "we've been patient with you, but this is no time for riddles. We save those for feasts and drinking bouts. Can you not say plainly whence you come and how you got here?"

Gerald covered his face, shaking.
"Let the man alone, Helgi," said Thorgunna. "Can you not see he's troubled?"

He raised his head and gave her the look of a hurt dog that someone has patted. It was dim in the hall, enough light coming in by the loft windows so no candles were lit, but not enough to see well by. Nevertheless, I marked a reddening in both their faces.

Gerald drew a long breath and fumbled about; his clothes were made with pockets. He brought out a small parchment box and from it took a little white stick that he put in his mouth. Then he took out another box, and a wooden stick from it which burst into flame when scratched. With the fire he kindled the stick in his mouth, and sucked in the smoke.

We all stared "Is that a Christian rite?" asked Helgi.
"No... not just so." A wry, disappointed smile twisted his lips. "I'd have thought you'd be more surprised, even terrified."
"It's something new," I admitted, "but we're a sober folk on Iceland. Those fire sticks could be useful. Did you come to trade in them?"
"Hardly." He sighed. The smoke he breathed in seemed to steady him, which was odd, because the smoke in the hall had made him cough and water at the eyes. "The truth is... something you will not believe. I can scarce believe it myself."

We waited. Thorgunna stood leaning forward, her lips parted.
"That lightning bolt—" Gerald nodded wearily. "I was out in the storm, and somehow the lightning must have struck me in just the right way, a way that happens only once in many thousands of times. It threw me back into the past."

Those were his words, priest I did not understand, and told him so.
"It's hard to see," he agreed. "God give that I'm only dreaming. But if this is a dream, I must endure till I wake up... well, look. I was born one thousand, nine hundred and thirty-two years after Christ, in a land to the west which
you have not yet found. In the twenty-third year of my life, I was in Iceland as part of my country's army. The lightning struck me, and now ... now it is less than one thousand years after Christ, and yet I am here--almost a thousand years before I was born, I am here!"

We sat very still. I signed myself with the Hammer and took a long pull from my horn. One of the maids whimpered, and Ragnhild whispered so fiercely I could hear: "Be still. The poor fellow's out of his head. There's no harm in him."

I agreed with her, though less sure of the last part of it. The gods can speak through a madman, and the gods are not always to be trusted. Or he could turn berserker, or he could be under a heavy curse that would also touch us.

He sat staring before him, and I caught a few fleas and cracked them while I thought about it. Gerald noticed and asked with some horror if we had many fleas here.

"Why, of course," said Thorgunna. "Have you none?"

"No." He smiled crookedly. "Not yet--"

"Ah," she signed, "you must be sick."

She was a level-headed girl. I saw her thought, and so did Ragnhild and Helgi--clearly, a man so sick that he had no fleas could be expected to rave. There was still some worry about whether we might catch the illness, but I deemed it unlikely; his trouble was all in the head, perhaps from a blow he had taken. In any case, the matter was come down to earth now, something we could deal with.

As a godi, a chief who holds sacrifices, it behooved me not to turn a stranger out. Moreover, if he could fetch in many of those little fire-kindling sticks, a profitable trade might be built up. So I said Gerald should go to bed. He protested, but we manhandled him into the shut-bed and there he lay tired and was soon asleep. Thorgunna said she would take care of him.

The next day I decided to sacrifice a horse, both because of the timber we had found and to take away any curse there might be on Gerald. Furthermore, the beast I had picked was old and useless, and we were short of fresh meat. Gerald had spent the day lounging moodily around the garth, but when I came in to supper I found him and my daughter laughing.

"You seem to be on the road to health," I said.

"Oh yes. It... could be worse for me." He sat down at my side as the carles set up the trestle table and the maids brought in the food. "I was ever much taken with the age of the vikings, and I have some skills."

"Well," I said, "if you're no home, we can keep you here for a while."

"I can work," he said eagerly. "I'll be worth my pay."

Now I knew he was from a far land, because what chief would work on any land but his own, and for hire at that? Yet he had the easy manner of the highborn, and had clearly eaten well all his life. I overlooked that he had made no gifts; after all, he was shipwrecked.

"Maybe you can get passage back to your United States," said Helgi. "We could hire a ship. I'm fain to see that realm."

"No," said Gerald bleakly. "There is no such place. Not yet."

"So you still hold to that idea you came from tomorrow?" grunted Sigurd. "Crazy notion. Pass the pork."

"I do," said Gerald. There was a calm on him now. "And I can prove it--"

"I don't see how you speak our tongue, if you come from so far away," I said, I would not call a man a liar to his face, unless we were swapping brags in a friendly way, but...

"They speak otherwise in my land and time," he replied, "but it happens than in Iceland the tongue changed little since the old days, and I learned it when I came there."

"If you are a Christian," I said, "you must bear with us while we sacrifice tonight--"

"I've naught against that," he said. "I fear I never was a very good Christian. I'd like to watch. How is it done?"

I told him how I would smite the horse with a hammer before the god, and cut his throat, and sprinkle the blood about with willow twigs; thereafter we would butcher the carcass and feast. He said hastily:

"There's my chance to prove what I am. I have a weapon that will kill the horse with... with a flash of lightning."

"What is it?" I wondered. We all crowded around while he took the metal club out of his sheath and showed it to us. I had my doubts; it looked well enough for hitting a man, perhaps, but had no edge, though a wondrously skilful smith had forged it. "Well, we can try," I said.

He showed us what else he had in his pockets. There were some coins of remarkable roundness and sharpness, a small key, a stick with lead in it for writing, a flat purse holding many bits of marked paper; when he told us solemnly that some of this paper was money, even Thorgunna had to laugh. Best of all was a knife whose blade folded into the handle. When he saw me admiring that, he gave it to me, which was well done for a shipwrecked man. I said I would give him clothes and a good ax, as well as lodging for as long as needful.
No, I don't have the knife now. You shall hear why. It's a pity, for it was a good knife, though rather small.

"What were you ere the war arrow went out in your land?" asked Heigi. "A merchant?"

"No," said Gerald. "I was an... engineer... that is, I was learning how to be one. That's a man who builds things, bridges and roads and tools... more than just an artisan. So I think my knowledge could be of great value here." I saw a fever in his eyes, "Yes, give me time and I'll be a king!"

"We have no king in Iceland," I grunted. "Our forefathers came hither to get away from kings. Now we meet at the Kings to try suits and pass new laws, but each man must get his own redress as best he can."

"But suppose the man in the wrong won't yield?" he asked.

"Then there can be a fine feud," said Helgi, and went on to relate with sparkling eyes some of the killings there had lately been. Gerald looked unhappy and fingered his gun. That is what he called his fire-spitting club.

"Your clothing is rich," said Thorgunna softly. "Your folk must own broad acres at home."

"No," he said, "our... our king gives every man in the army clothes like these. As for my family, we owned no land, we rented our home in a building where many other families also dwelt."

I am not purse-proud, but it seemed me he had not been honest, a landless man sharing my high seat like a chief. Thorgunna covered my huffiness by saying. "You will gain a farm later."

After dark we went out to the shrine. The carles had built a fire before it, and as I opened the door the wooden Odin appeared to leap forth. Gerald muttered to my daughter that it was a clumsy bit of carving, and since my father had made it I was still more angry with him. Some folks have no understanding of the fine arts.

Nevertheless, I let him help me lead the horse forth to the altar stone. I took the blood-bowl in my hands and said he could now slay the beast if he would. He drew his gun, put the end behind the horse's ear, and squeezed.

There was a crack, and the beast quivered and dropped with a hole blown through its skull, wasting the brains a clumsy weapon. I caught a whiff of smell, sharp and bitter like that around a volcano. We all jumped, one of the women screamed, and Gerald looked proud. I gathered my wits and finished the rest of the sacrifice as usual. Gerald did not like having blood sprinkled over his 3 but then, of course, he was a Christian. Nor would he take more than a little of the soup and flesh.

Afterward Helgi questioned him about the gun, and he said it could kill a man at bowshot distance but there was no witchcraft in it, only use of some tricks we did not know as yet. Having heard of the Greek fire, I believed him. A gun could be useful in a fight, as indeed I was to learn, but it did not seem very practical iron costing what it does, and months of forging needed for each one.

I worried more about the man himself.

And the next morning I found him telling Thorgunna a great deal of foolishness about his home, buildings tall as mountains and wagons that flew or went without horses. He said there were eight or nine thousand thousands of folk in his city, a burgh called New Jorvik or the like. I enjoy a good brag as well as the next man, but this was too much and I told him gruffly to come along and help me get in some strayed cattle.

After a day scrambling around the hills I knew well enough that Gerald could scarce tell a cow's prow from her stern. We almost had the strays once, but he ran stupidly across their path and turned them so the work was all to do again. I asked him with strained courtesy if he could "rillr, shear, wield scythe or flail, and he said no, he had never lived on a farm.

That's a pity," I remarked, "for everyone on Iceland does, unless he be outlawed."

He flushed at my tone. "I can do enough else," he answered. "Give me some tools and I'll show you metalwork well done."

That brightened me, for truth to tell, none of our household was a very gifted smith. "That's an honorable trade," I said, "and you can be of great help. I have a broken sword and several bent spearheads to be mended, and it were no bad idea to shoe all the horses." His admission that he did know how to put on a shoe was not very dampening to me then.

We had returned home as we talked, and Thorgunna came angrily forward. "That's no way to treat a guest, father!" she said. "Making him work like a carle, indeed!"

Gerald smiled. "I'll be glad to work," he said. "I need a... a stake... something to start me afresh. Also, I want to repay a little of your kindness."

That made me mild toward him, and I said it was not his fault they had different customs in the United States. On the morrow he could begin work in the smithy, and I would pay him, yet he would be treated as an equal, since craftsmen are valued. This earned him black looks from the housefolk.

That evening he entertained us well with stories of his home; true or not, they made good listening. However, he had no real polish, being unable to compose even two lines of verse. They must be a raw and backward lot in the United States. He said his task in the army had been to keep order among the troops. Helgi said this was unheard-of, and he must be a brave man who would offend so many men, but Gerald said folk obeyed him out of fear of the
king. When he added that the term of a levy in the United States was two years, and that men could be called to war even in harvest time, I said he was well out of a country with so ruthless and powerful a king.

"No," he answered wistfully, "we are a free folk, who say what we please."

"But it seems you may not do as you please," said Helgi.

"Well," he said, "We may not murder a man just because he offends us."

"Not even if he has slain you own kin?" asked Helgi.

"No. It is for the... the king to take vengeance on behalf of us all."

I chuckled. "Your yarns are good," I said, "but there you've hit a snag. How could the king even keep track of all the murders, let alone avenge them? Why, the man wouldn't even have time to beget an heir!"

He could say no more for all the laughter that followed.

The next day Gerald went to the smithy, with a thrall to pump the bellows for him. I was gone that day and night, down to Reykjavik to dicker with Hjalmar Broadnose about some sheep. I invited him back for an overnight stay, and we rode into the garth with his son Ketill, a red-haired sulky youth of twenty winters who had been refused by Thorgunnau.

I found Gerald sitting gloomily on a bench in the hall. He wore the clothes I had given him, his own having been spoiled by ash and sparks.

what had he awaited, the fool? He was talking in a low voice with my daughter.

"Well," I said as I entered, "how went it?"

My man Grim snickered. "He has mined two spearheads, but we put out the fire he started ere the whole smithy burned."

"How's this?" I cried. "I thought you said you were a smith."

Gerald stood up, defiantly. "I worked with other tools, and better ones, at home," he replied. "You do it differently here."

It seemed he had built up the fire too hot; his hammer had struck everywhere but the place it should; he had wrecked the temper of the steel through not knowing when to quench it Smithcraft takes years to learn, of course, but he should have admitted he was not even an apprentice.

"Well," I snapped, "what can you do, then, to earn your bread?" It irked me to be made a fool of before Hjalmar and Ketill, whom I had told about the stranger.

"Odin alone knows," said Grim. "I took him with me to ride after your goats, and never have I seen a worse horseman. I asked him if he could even spin or weave, and he said no."

"That was no question to ask a man!" flared Thorgunna. "He should have slain you for it!"

"He should indeed," laughed Grim. "But let me carry on the tale. I thought we would also repair your bridge over the foss. Well, he can just barely handle a saw, but he nearly took his own foot off with the adz."

"We don't use those tools, I tell you!" Gerald doubled his fists and looked close to tears.

I motioned my guests to sit down. "I don't suppose you can butcher a hog or smoke it either," I said.

"No," I could scarce hear him.

"Well, then, man... what can you do?"

"I---" He could get no words out.

"You were a warrior," said Thorgunna.

"Yes that I was!" he said, his face kindling.

"Small use in Iceland when you have no other skills," I grumbled, "but perhaps, if you can get passage to the eastlands, some king will take you in his guard." Myself I doubted it, for a guardsman needs manners that will do credit to his master; but I had not the heart to say so.

Ketill Hjalmarsson had plainly not liked the way Thorgunna stood close to Gerald and spoke for him. Now he sneered and said: "I might even doubt your skill in fighting."

"That I have been trained for," said Gerald grimly.

"Will you wrestle with me, then?" asked Ketill.

"Gladyly!" spat Gerald.

Priest, what is a man to think? As I grow older, I find life to be less and less the good-and-evil, black-and-white thing you say it is; we are all of us some hue of gray. This useless fellow, this spiritless lout who could even be asked if he did women's work and not lift ax, went out in the yard with Ketill Hjalmarsson and threw him three times running. There was some trick he had of grabbing the clothes as Ketill charged... I called a stop when the youth was nearing murderous rage, praised them both, and filled the beer-horns. But Ketill brooded sullenly on the bench all evening.

Gerald said something about making a gun like his own. It would have to be bigger, a cannon he called it, and could sink ships and scatter armies. He would need the help of smiths, and also various stuffs. Charcoal was easy,
and sulfur could be found in the volcano country, I suppose, but what is this saltpeter?

Also, being suspicious by now, I questioned him closely as to how he would make such a thing. Did he know just how to mix the powder? No, he admitted. What size would the gun have to be? When he told me at least as long as a man I laughed and asked him how a piece that size could be cast or bored, even if we could scrape together that much iron. This he did not know either.

"You haven't the tools to make the tools to make the tools," he said. I don't know what he meant by that "God help me, I can't run through a thousand years of history all by myself."

He took out the last of his little smoke sticks and lit it. Helgi had tried a puff earlier and gotten sick, though he remained a friend of Gerald's. Now my son proposed to take a boat in the morning and go up to Ice Fjord, where I had some money outstanding I wanted to collect. Hjalmar and Ketill said they would come along for the trip, and Thorgunna pleaded so hard that I let her come along too.

"An ill thing," muttered Sigurd. "All men know the landtrolls like not a woman aboard a ship. It's unlucky."

"How did your father ever bring women to this island?" I grinned.

At this time I owned a half share in a ship that went to Norway, bartering wadmal for timber. It was a profitable business until she ran afoul of vikings during the disorders while Olaf Tryggvason was overthrowing Jarl Haakon there. Some men will do anything to make a living thieves, cutthroats, they ought to be hanged, the worthless robbers pouncing on honest merchantmen. Had they any courage or honesty they would go to Ireland, which is full of plunder.

Well, anyhow, the ship was abroad, but we had three boats and took one of these. Besides myself, Thorgunna, and Helgi, Hjalmar and Ketill went along, with Grim and Gerald. I saw how the stranger winced at the cold water as we launched her, and afterward took off his shoes and stockings to let his feet dry. He had been surprised to learn we had a bathhouse did he think us savages? but still, he was dainty as a woman and soon moved upwind of our feet.

There was a favoring breeze, so we raised mast and sail. Gerald tried to help, but of course did not know one line from another and got them tangled. Grim snarled at him and Ketill laughed nastily. But ereelong we were under way, and he came and sat by me where I had the steering oar.

He had plainly lain long awake thinking, and now he ventured timidly: "In my land they have... will have a rig and rudder which are better than this. With them, you can crisscross against the wind."

"Ah, so now our skilled sailor must give us redes!" sneered KetilL

"Be still," said Thoigunna sharply. "Let Gerald speak."

He gave her a sly look of thanlr^ and I was not unwilling to listen. 'This is something which could easily be made," he said. "I've used such boats myself, and know them well. First, then, the safl should not be square and hung from a yardarm, but three-cornered, with the third corner lashed to a yard swiveling from the mast Then, your steering oar is in the wrong place there should be a rudder in the middle of the stem, guided by a bar.' He was eager now, tracing the plan with his fingernail on Thoigunna's cloak, "Witibt these two things, and a deep keel going down to about the height of a man for a boat this size a ship can move across the path of the wind... so. And another sail can be hung between the mast and the prow."

Well, priest, I must say the idea had its merits, and were it not for fear of bad luck for everything of his was unlucky I might even now play with it. But there are clear drawbacks, which I pointed out to him in a reasonable way.

"First and worst," I said, "this rudder and deep keel would make it all but impossible to beach the ship or sail up a shallow river. Perhaps they have many harbors where you hail from, but here a craft must take what landings she can find, and must be speedily launched if there should be an attack. Second, this mast of yours would be hard to unstep when the wind dropped and oars came out. Third, the sail is the wrong shape to stretch as an awning when one must sleep at sea."

"The ship could lie out, and you could go to land in a small boat," he said. "Also, you could build cabins aboard for shelter."

"The cabins would get in the way of the oars," I said, "unless the ship were hopelessly broad-beamed or unless the oarsmen sat below a deck like the galley slaves of Mildagard; and free men would not endure rowing in such foulness."

"Must you have oars?" he asked like a very child.

Laughing barked along the hull. Even the gulls hovering to starboard, where the shore rose darkly, mewed their scorn. "Do they also have tame winds in the place whence you came?" snorted Hjalmar. "What happens if you're becalmed for days, maybe, with provisions running out"

"You could build a ship big enough to carry many weeks' provisions," said Gerald.

"If you have the wealth of a king, you could," said Heigi. "And such a king's ship, lying helpless on a flat sea,
would be swarmed by every viking from here to Jomsborg. As for leaving the ship out on the water while you make
camp, what would you have for shelter, or for defense if you should be trapped there?"

Gerald slumped. Thorgunna said to him gently: "Some folks have no heart to try anything new. I think it's a
grand idea."

He smiled at her, a weary smile, and plucked up the will to say something about a means for finding north even
in cloudy weather he said there were stones which always pointed north when hung by a string. I told him kindly
that I would be most interested if he could find me some of this stone; or if he knew where it was to be had, I could
ask a trader to fetch me a piece. But this he did not know, and fell silent. Ketill opened his mouth, but got such an
edged look from Thorgunna that he shut it again; his looks declared plainly enough what a liar he thought Gerald to
be.

The wind turned contrary after a while, so we lowered the mast and took to the oars. Gerald was strong and
willing, though clumsy; however, his hands were so soft that erelong they bled. I offered to let him rest, but he kept
doggedly at the work.

Watching him sway back and forth, under the dreary creak of the tholes, the shaft red and wet where he gripped
it, I thought much about him. He had done everything wrong which a man could do thus I imagined then, not
knowing the future and I did not like the way Thorgunna's eyes strayed to him and rested there. He was no man for
my daughter, landless and penniless and helpless. Yet I could not keep from liking him. Whether his tale was true or
only a madness, I felt he was honest about it; and surely there was something strange about the way he had come. I
noticed the cuts on his chin from my razor; he had said he was not used to our kind of shaving and would grow a
beard. He had tried hard. I wondered how well I would have done, landing alone in this witch country of his dreams,
with a gap of forever between me and my home.

Perhaps that same misery was what had turned Thorgunna's heart. Women are a kittle breed, priest, and you
who leave them alone belike understand them as well as I who have slept with half a hundred in six different lands. I
do not thmlr they even understand themselves. Birth and life and death, those are the great mysteries, which none
will ever fathom, and a woman is closer to them than a man.

The ill wind stiffened, the sea grew iron gray and choppy under low leaden clouds, and our headway was poor.
At sunset we could row no more, but must pull in to a small unpeopled bay and make camp as well as could be on
the strand.

We had brought firewood along, and tinder. Gerald, though staggering with weariness, made himself useful, his
little sticks kindling the blaze more easily than flint and steel. Thorgunna set herself to cook our supper. We were
not warded by the boat from a lean, whining wind; her cloak fluttered like wings and her hair blew wild above the
streaming flames. It was the time of light nights, the sky a dim dusky blue, the sea a wrinkled metal sheet and the
land like something risen out of dreammists. We men huddled in our cloaks, holding numbed hands to the fire and
saying little.

I felt some cheer was needed, and ordered a cask of my best and strongest ale broached. An evil Norn made me
do that, but no man escapes his weird. Our bellies seemed all the emptier now when our noses drank in the sputter of
a spitted joint, and the ale went swiftly to our heads. I remember declaiming the death song of Ragnar Hairybreeks
for no other reason than that I felt like declaring it.

Thorgunna came to stand over Gerald where he slumped. I saw how her fingers brushed his hair, ever so
lightly, and Ketill Hjalmarsson did too. "Have they no verses in your land?" she asked.

"Not like yours," he said, looking up. Neither of them looked away again. "We sing rather than chant. I wish I
had my guitar here that's a kind of harp."

"Ah, an Irish bard!" said Hjalmar Broadnose.

I remember strangely well how Gerald smiled, and what he said in his own tongue, though I know not the
meaning: "Only on me wither's side, begorra" I suppose it was magic.

"Well, sing for us," asked Thorgunna.

"Let me think," he said. "I shall have to put it in Norse words for you." After a little while, staring up at her
through the windy night, he began a song. It had a tune I liked, thus:

From this valley they tell me you're leaving,
I shall miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.
You will carry the sunshine with you,
That has brightened my life all the while....
I don't remember the rest, except that it was not quite decent.

When he had finished, Hjalmar and Grim went over to see if the meat was done. I saw a glimmering of tears in
my daughter's eyes. "That was a lovely thing," she said.

Ketill sat upright. The flames splashed his face with wild, running hues. There was a rawness in his tone: "Yes,
we've found what this fellow can do: sit about and make pretty songs for the girls. Keep him for that, Ospak."

Thorgunna whitened, and Helgi clapped hand to sword. I saw how Gerald's face darkened, and his voice was thick: "That was no way to talk. Take it back."

Ketill stood up. "No," he said, "I ask no pardon of an idler living off honest yeomen."

He was raging, but he had sense enough to shift the insult from my family to Gerald alone. Otherwise he and his father would have had the four of us to deal with. As it was, Gerald stood up too, fists knotted at his sides, and said, "Will you step away from here and settle this?"

"Gladly!" Ketill turned and walked a few yards down the beach, taking his shield from the boat Gerald followed. Thorgunna stood with stricken face, then picked up his ax and ran after him.

"Are you going weaponless?" she shrieked.

Gerald stopped, looking dazed. "I don't want that," he mumbled. "Fists."

Ketill puffed himself up and drew sword. "No doubt you're used to fighting like thralls in your land," he said. "So if you'll crave my pardon, I'll let this matter rest."

Gerald stood with drooped shoulders. He stared at Thorgunna as if he were blind, as if asking her what to do.

She handed him the ax.

"So you want me to kill him?" he whispered.

"Yes," she answered.

Then I knew she loved him, for otherwise why should she have cared if he disgraced himself?

Helgi brought him his helmet. He put it on, took the ax, and went forward.

"How is this," said Hjalmar to me, "Do you stand by the stranger, Ospak?"

"No," I said, "He's no kin or oath-brother of mine. This is not my quarrel."

"That's good," said Hjalmar. "I'd not like to fight with you, my friend. You were ever a good neighbor."

We went forth together and staked out the ground. Thorgunna told me to lend Gerald my sword, so he could use a shield too, but the man looked oddly at me and said he would rather have the ax. They squared away before each other, he and Ketill, and began fighting.

This was no holmgang, with rules and a fixed order of blows and first blood meaning victory. There was death between those two. Ketill rushed in with the sword whistling in his hand. Gerald sprang back, wielding the ax awkwardly. It bounced off Ketill's shield. The youth grinned and cut at Gerald's legs. I saw blood well forth and stain the ripped breeches.

It was murder from the beginning. Gerald had never used an ax before. Once he even struck with the flat of it. He would have been hewed down at once had Ketill's sword not been blunted on his helmet and had he not been quick on his feet. As it was, he was soon lurching with a dozen wounds.

"Stop the fight!" Thorgunna cried aloud and ran forth. Helgi caught her arms and forced her back, where she struggled and kicked till Grim must help. I saw grief on my son's face but a malicious grin on the carle's.

Gerald turned to look. Ketill's blade came down and slashed his left hand. He dropped the ax. Ketill snarled and readied to finish him, Gerald drew his gun. It made a flash and a barking noise. Ketill fell, twitched for a moment, and was quiet. His lower jaw was blown off and the back of his head gone.

There came a long stillness, where only the wind and the sea had voice.

Then Hjalmar trod forth, his face working but a cold steadiness over him. He knelt and closed his son's eyes, as token that the right of vengeance was his. Rising, he said. "That was an evil deed. For that you shall be outlawed."

"It wasn't magic," said Gerald in a numb tone. "It was like a... a bow. I had no choice. I didn't want to fight with more than my fists."

I trod between them and said the King must decide this matter, but that I hoped Hjalmar would take weregild for Ketill.

"But I killed him to save my own life!" protested Gerald.

"Nevertheless, weregild must be paid, if Ketill's kin will take it," I explained. "Because of the weapon, I think it will be doubled, but that is for the King to judge."

Hjalmar had many other sons, and it was not as if Gerald belonged to a famly at odds with his own, so I felt he would agree. However, he laughed coldly and asked where a man lacking wealth would find the silver.

Thorgunna stepped up with a wintry calm and said we would pay it. I opened my mouth, but when I saw her eyes I nodded. "Yes, we will," I said, "in order to keep the peace."

"Then you make this quarrel your own?" asked Hjalmar.

"No," I answered "This man is no blood of my own. But if I choose to make him a gift of money to use as he wishes, what of it?"

Hjalmar smiled. There was sorrow crinkled around his eyes, but he looked on me with old comradeship.

"Erelong this man may be your son-in-law," he said. "I know the signs, Ospak. Then indeed he will be of your
folk. Even helping him now in his need will range you on his side."

"And so?" asked Helgi, most softly.

"And so, while I value your friendship, I have sons who will take the death of their brother ill. They'll want revenge on Gerald Samsson, if only for the sake of their good names, and thus our two houses will be sundered and one manslaying will lead to another. It has happened often enough ere now." Hjalmar sighed. "I myself wish peace with you, Ospak, but if you take this killer's side it must be otherwise."

I thought for a moment, thought of Helgi lying with his skull cloven, of my other sons on their garths drawn to battle because of a man they had never seen, I thought of having to wear byrnies every time we went down for driftwood and never knowing when we went to bed whether we would wake to find the house ringed in by spearmen.

"Yes," I said, "you are right, Hjalmar. I withdraw my offer. Let this be a matter between you and him alone."

We gripped hands on it.

Thorgunna gave a small cry and fled into Gerald's arms. He held her close. "What does this mean?" he asked slowly.

"I cannot keep you any longer," I said, "but belike some crofter will give you a root Hjalmar is a law-abiding man and will not harm you until the King has outlawed you. That will not be before midsummer. Perhaps you can get passage out of Iceland ere then."

"A useless one like me?" he replied bitterly.

Thorgunna whirled free and blazed that I was a coward and a perjurer and all else evil. I let her have it out, then laid my hands on her shoulders.

"It is for the house," I said. "The house and the blood, which are holy. Men die and women weep, but while the kindred live our names are remembered. Can you ask a score of men to die for your own hankerings?"

Long did she stand, and to this day I know not what her answer would have been. It was Gerald who spoke.

"No," he said. "I suppose you have right, Ospak... the right of your time, which is not mine." He took my hand, and Helgi's. His lips brushed Thorgunna's cheek. Then he turned and walked out into the darkness.

I heard, later, that he went to earth with Thorvald Hallsson, the crofter of Humpback Fell, and did not tell his host what had happened. He must have hoped to go unnoticed until he could arrange passage to the eastlands somehow. But of course word spread -- I remember his brag that in the United States men had means to talk from one end of the land to another. So he must have looked down on us, sitting on our lonely garths, and not known how fast word could get around. Thorvald's son Hrolf went to Brand Sealskin-boots to talk about some matter, and of course mentioned the stranger, and soon all the western island had the tale.

Now if Gerald had known he must give notice of a manslaying at the first garth he found, he would have been safe at least till the King met, for Hjalmar and his sons are sober men who would not kill a man still under the protection of the law. But as it was, his keeping the matter secret made him a murderer and therefore at once an outlaw. Hjalmar and his kin rode up to Humpback Fell and haled him forth. He shot his way past them with the gun and fled into the hills. They followed him, having several hurts and one more death to avenge. I wonder if Gerald thought the strangeness of his weapon would unnerve us. He may not have known that every man dies when his time comes, neither sooner nor later, so that fear of death is useless.

At the end, when they had him trapped, his weapon gave out on him. Then he took up a dead man's sword and defended himself so valiantly that Ulf Hjalmarsson has limped ever since. It was well done, as even his foes admitted; they are an eldritch race in the United States, but they do not lack manhood.

When he was slain, his body was brought back. For fear of the ghost, he having perhaps been a warlock, it was burned, and all he had owned was laid in the fire with him. That was where I lost the knife he had given me. The barrow stands out on the moor, north of here, and folk shun it, though the ghost has not walked. Now, with so much else happening, he is slowly being forgotten.

And that is the tale, priest, as I saw it and heard it. Most men think Gerald Samsson was crazy, but I myself believe he did come from out of time, and that his doom was that no man may ripen a field before harvest season. Yet I look into the future, a thousand years hence, when they fly through the air and ride in horseless wagons and smash whole cities with one blow. I think of this Iceland then, and of the young United States men there to help defend us in a year when the end of the world hovers close. Perhaps some of them, walking about on the heaths, will see that barrow and wonder what ancient warrior lies buried there, and they may even wish they had lived long ago in his time when men were free.
THE CUCKOO CLOCK
by Wesley Barefoot

You know a murderer preys on your household--lives with you--depends on you--and you have no defence!

Death wore the seeming of a battered Chevrolet. The child's scream and the screech of rubber on concrete knifed through two seconds of time before snapping, like a celery stalk of sound, into aching silence. The silence of limbo, called into being for the space of a slow heartbeat. Then the thud of running feet, the rising hubbub of many voices.

"Give her air!"
"Keep back. Don't try to move her."
"Somebody call an ambulance."
"Yeah, and somebody call a cop, too."

"I couldn't help it." It was the driver of the ramshackle Chevvie. "She fell off the curb right in front of me. Honest to God, it wasn't my fault."
"Got to report these things right away," said the grey-haired man beside him. "No cause to worry if you ain't to blame."
"Probably no brakes," said a heavily accented voice, and another spoke as if on cue, "Probably no insurance, neither."
"Let me through! Oh, please--" The woman's voice was on the edge of hysteria. She came through the crowd like an automaton, not seeing the people she shoved and elbowed aside.

* * * * *

"D.O.A.," said the woman heavily. Her face was no longer twisted with shock, and she was almost pretty again. "D.O.A. Dead on arrival, it means. Oh, Jim, I never knew they said that." Suddenly there were tears in her blue eyes. There had been many tears, now.

"Take it easy, Jean, honey." Jim Blair hoisted his lank six feet out of the old rocker, and crossed the room, running a nervous hand through his cornshuck hair. She's only thirty, he thought, and I'm three years older. That's awfully young to have bred three kids and lost them. He took her in his arms. "I know how tough it is. It's bad enough for me, and probably worse for you. But at least we're sure they'll never be bomb fodder. And we still have Joanna."

* * * * *

She twisted away from him, her voice suddenly bitter. "Don't give me that Pollyanna stuff, Jim. 'Goody, goody, only a broken leg. It might have been your back.' There's no use trying to whitewash it. Our kids, our own kids, all gone. Dead." She began to sob. "I wish I were, too."

"Jean, Jean--"

"I don't care. I mean it. Everything bad has happened since Joanna came to live with us."
"Darling, you can't blame the child for a series of accidents."
"I know." She raised her tear-stained face. "But after all-- Michael, drowned. Then Steve, falling off the water tower. Now it's Marian." Her fingers gripped his arm tightly. "Jim, each of them was playing alone with Joanna when it happened."

"Accidents, just accidents," he said. It wasn't like Jean, this talk. Almost-- His mind shied away from the word, and circled back. Almost paranoid. But Jean was stable, rational, always had been. Still, maybe a little chat with Doctor Holland would be a good idea. Breakdowns do happen.

They both turned at the slamming of the screen door. Then came the patter of childish feet on the kitchen linoleum, and Joanna burst into the room.

"Mommy, I want to play with Marian. Why can't I play with Marian?"

Jean put her arm around the girl's thin shoulder. "Darling, you won't be able to play with Marian for--quite a while. You mustn't worry about it now."

"Mommy, she looked just like she was asleep, then they came and took her away." Her lips trembled. "I'm frightened, Mommy."

* * * * *

Jim looked down at the dark eyes, misted now, the straight brown hair, and the little snub nose with its dusting of freckles. She's all we have left, poor kid, and not even ours, really. Helen's baby.

He looked up as the battered cuckoo clock on the mantel clicked warningly. "Time for little girls to be in bed, Joanna. Run along now like a good girl, and get washed." Even as he spoke the miniature doors flew open and the caricature of a bird popped out, shrilly announcing the hour. It cuckooed eight times, then bounced back inside.
Joanna watched entranced.

"Bed time, darling," said Jean gently. "School tomorrow, remember? And don't forget to brush your teeth."

"I won't. Goodnight, Mommy, goodnight, Daddy." She turned up her face to be kissed, smiled at them, and was gone. They listened to her footsteps on the stairs.

"Jim, I'm sorry about the things I said," Jean's voice was hesitant, a little ashamed. "It is hard, though, you know it is-- Jim, aren't you listening? After all, you don't have to watch the clock now." Her smile was as laboried as the joke.

He smiled back. "I think I'll take a walk, honey. Some fresh air would do me good."

"Jim, don't go. I'd rather not be alone just now."

"Well," he looked at her, keeping his expression blank. "All right, dear. How about some coffee? I could stand another cup." And he thought: Tomorrow I'll go. I'll talk to Holland tomorrow.

* * * * *

"Let me get this straight, Jim." Holland's pudgy face was sober, his eyes serious. "You started out by thinking Jean was showing paranoid tendencies, and offhand I'm inclined to agree with you. Overnight you changed your mind and began thinking that maybe, just maybe, she might be right. Honestly, don't you suspect your own reasons for such a quick switch?"

"Sure I do, Bob," Blair said worriedly. "Do you think I haven't beaten out my brains over it? I know the idea's monstrous. But just suppose there was a branch of humanity--if you could call it human--living off us unsuspected. A branch that knows how to eliminate--competition--almost by instinct."

"Now hold on a minute, Jim. You've taken Jean's reaction to this last death, plus a random association with a cuckoo clock, and here you are with a perfectly wild hypothesis. You've always been rational and analytical, old man. Surely you can realize that a perfectly normal urge to rationalize Jean's conclusions is making you concur with them against your better judgment."

"Bob--"

"I'm not through, Jim. Just consider how fantastic the whole idea is. Because of a series of accidents you can't accuse a child of planned murder. Nor can you further hypothesize that all orphans are changelings, imbued with an instinct to polish off their foster-siblings."

"Not all orphans, Bob. Not planned murder, either. Take it easy. Just some of them. A few of them--different. Growing up. Placing their young with well-to-do families somehow, and then dropping unobtrusively out of the picture. And the young growing up, and always the natural children dying off in one way or another. The changeling inherits, and the process is repeated, step by step. Can you say it's impossible? Do you know it's impossible?"

"I wouldn't say impossible, Jim. But I would say that your thesis has a remarkably low index of probability. Why don't others suspect, besides you?"

Jim spread his hands hopelessly. "I don't know. Maybe they do. Maybe these creatures--if they do exist--have some means of protection we don't know about."

"You need more than maybes, Jim. What about Joanna Simmons' mother? According to your theories she should have been well off. Was she?"

"No, she wasn't," Jim admitted reluctantly. "She came here and took a job with my outfit. Said she was divorced, and had lived in New York. Then she quit to take a position in California, and we agreed to board Joanna until she got settled. Warrenburg was the town. She was killed there quite horribly, in a terrible auto accident."

"Have you any reason for suspecting skulduggery? Honestly, Jim? Or for labelling her one of your human--er--cuckoos?"

"Only my hunch. We had a newspaper clipping, and a letter from the coroner. We even sent the money for her funeral. But those things could be faked, Bob."

"Give me some evidence that they were faked, and I'll be happy to reinspect your views." Holland levered his avoirdupois out of his chair. "In the meantime, relax. Take a trip if you can. Try not to worry."

Jim grinned humorlessly. "Mustn't let myself get excited, eh? Okay, Bob. But if I get hold of any evidence that I think you might accept, I'll be back. The last laugh and all that. Pending developments you take it easy, too. Don't let yourself get overworked. Stay out of the sun. So long now."

"So long, Jim."

* * * * *

It was cool in the Warrenburg city hall, though outside the streets were sizzling.
"Sorry, Mr. Blair," said the stout, motherly woman with the horn-rimmed glasses. "We've no record of a Helen Simmons. Nothing whatever." She closed the file with resolute finality.

Jim stared at her. "Are you sure? There must be something. Mightn't there be a special file for accident cases? She was here in Warrenburg. She died here."
The woman thinned her lips, shook her head. "If we had any information, it'd be right where I looked. There isn't a thing. Have you tried her last address? Maybe they could tell you something. We can't."

"I'll try that next. Thanks a lot."
"Sorry we couldn't help you."

He went out slowly.

* * * * *

872 Maple was a rambling frame house dozing on a wide flower-bordered lot. There was nothing sleepy about the diminutive woman who opened the door to Jim's knock. Snapping black eyes peered at him from a maze of wrinkles. A veined hand moved swiftly to smooth down the white hair that framed her face.

"Looking for someone, young man?"
"Just information, Mrs.--"
"Collins, and it's Miss. Don't give out information about guests. You a bill collector?"
"No, Miss Collins. As a matter of fact, I'm trying to check up on an old friend I lost track of. Helen Simmons. She lived at this address for a while."

"Sure did. Well, come on in. Mind you, I don't usually do this, Mr.--"
"Blair." Without any fanfare a bill changed hands.
"Mr. Blair. Well, I can't tell you much. Try that green chair for size. What do you want to know?"

* * * * *

Jim studied the toe of his right shoe. His eyes were veiled. "I heard she was hurt, and hard up, and I was worried. My wife and I were friends of hers back east."

"Hurt, hard up? Humph! Not likely, spendin' all her time drivin' that English car around. Takin' trips. I'm not sayin' she didn't mind her manners, though."

"Did she have any close friends?"
"She was chummy with Edith Walton, the girl that works for Doc Mendel. He's county coroner in his spare time. No men. Didn't fool around at all. I'd a known."

* * * * *

Behind Jim's stony eyes the pattern took clearer form, as if a mosaic approached completion. A mosaic of carefully planned events that totalled horror. He shivered as the outlines of his hunch filled in. Helen--what creatures were these? Helen--not dead, not poor,--carefully planting ostensible proof of her death and going on to a new role, a new life, in London or Paris or Rome. A free, untrammelled life. And her child--if child was the word--in his home, repeating the pattern. Eliminating competition as her mother undoubtedly had done. The competition--his and Jean's children! Changeling, changeling-- No, not that. Incubus! He shivered again.

"Rabbits on your grave, Mr. Blair?"

He looked up slowly. "Sorry. I was just wondering. Did Miss Simmons have a job while she was here?"

"No, she didn't. One thing she did do was rent a place. Used to be Blands Hardware. Paid a month's rent, too. Said some friends of hers were plannin' to open a mortuary. Seemed like a funny way for people to do business, but then, no affair of mine."

Funny? No, not funny at all, but icily, eerily logical. There had to be an undertaking parlor where he could send the funeral expenses. He wondered if Helen had laughed when she opened the letter. Everyone his, or her, own undertaker. And the carefully cultivated friend in the coroner's office. For stationery.

He got to his feet. "Thanks a lot, Miss Collins. You've been a great deal of help." He almost smiled as he asked, "I don't suppose she left a forwarding address?"

The old head shook decisively. "Not a thing. Just packed and left, one Monday morning."

All the loose ends tied up tight on a Monday morning. Nothing to cause suspicion. Nothing to worry about. Only a woman's almost paranoid hysteria,--and a glance at a clock. Not very much to unmask--incubus. And what could he do? What could he do? Start talking and land in an institution? Well, there was one thing.

"Thanks again, Miss Collins."

He went out.

* * * * *

Swanson didn't look like the general conception of a small-town newspaperman. One knew instinctively that his beard wouldn't have been tobacco-stained even if he'd cared to grow one. And he didn't have a bottle of bourbon in the file marked Miscellaneous, or if he did he didn't bring it out.

"That never came from my paper," he said precisely. He handed the clipping back to Jim. "We don't use that type, for one thing. For another, Miss Simmons, so far as I know, wasn't killed here or anywhere else."

"You knew her?"

"I knew of her. I never met her."
"What about this report of her death?"

Swanson shrugged; tented manicured fingers. "It's a hoax. Any job printing shop with a Linotype could do it. In all likelihood it was some place in San Francisco. That's closest. It would be very difficult to check." His curiosity was showing.

"I see. Well, thanks for your time and trouble, Mr. Swanson."

"Not at all. Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

One thing to do. One thing that must be done.

Motors over the mountains. And riding with them, the numb resolve. Motors over the salt pans, the wheat lands, the corn belt.

The stewardess stops again. "Coffee, sir? A sandwich, perhaps?"

"I beg your-- Oh, no. No, thanks."

She watches him covertly, uneasily, longing for the end of the run.

Motors in the night.

And the dull determination growing, strengthening.

The airport, baggage, the ancient taxi with the piston slap, and at last the dark, familiar street.

"Jim, you're back! Oh, Jim, darling. Next time they send you west I'm going too. I am!"

"Okay, Jean, sure. Why not?"

"What's the matter, dear? Oh, you're tired, of course. I should have known. Sit down, Jim. Let me get you a drink."

"In a minute, Jean." Do it now now NOW! "Where's Joanna?"

"She's in bed. Hours ago. Jim, has something--?"

"Nothing, dear. I just want to look in on her. And freshen up a bit, of course."

"Jim--"

He smoothed away the worried frown with his forefinger.

"In a minute, dear."

She smiled uncertainly. "Hurry back, Jim."

* * * * *

The stairs unwind irrevocably, slow motion in a nightmare. The bedroom door opens, the hall light dim on the bed and the child's face. Incubus in the half dark.

For a moment Jim remembered wondering somewhere, sometime, what strange powers of protection might be implicit in such a creature. As the thought came into his mind, Joanna stirred. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

He took one step toward the bed.

The little girl eyes over their dusting of freckles slitted. Then they opened wide, became two glowing golden lakes that grew, and grew--

There was the feeling of a great soundless explosion in his mind. Waves of cool burning in his brain, churning and bubbling in every unknown corner, every cranny. Here and there a cell, or a group of cells, blanked out, the complex molecules reverting, becoming new again. Ready for fresh punch marks. Synapses shorted with soundless cold fire, and waited in timeless stasis for rechannelling. The waves frothed, became ripples, were gone. He stood unmoving.

What was it he was supposed to do? Let's see-- Tuck Joanna's blanket around her. But she was covered up snugly. Sleeping soundly, too, and for a few seconds he'd thought she was awake. And Jean was waiting downstairs, Jean and a cool drink.

Oh, yes, stop in the bathroom.

The stairs wind up again. It is good to be with one's family, relaxed in the well known chair. Not a worry in the world.

He sat there, his mind at ease, not caring much about anything. He didn't even look up when the clock on the mantel whirred, and the ridiculous bird popped out of its nest to herald a new day.

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**Contents**

ZEN

by Jerome Bixby
Because they were so likable and intelligent and adaptable--they were vastly dangerous!

It's difficult, when you're on one of the asteroids, to keep from tripping, because it's almost impossible to keep your eyes on the ground. They never got around to putting portholes in spaceships, you know--unnecessary when you're flying by GB, and psychologically inadvisable, besides--so an asteroid is about the only place, apart from Luna, where you can really see the stars.

There are so many stars in an asteroid sky that they look like clouds; like massive, heaped-up silver clouds floating slowly around the inner surface of the vast ebony sphere that surrounds you and your tiny foothold. They are near enough to touch, and you want to touch them, but they are so frighteningly far away ... and so beautiful: there's nothing in creation half so beautiful as an asteroid sky.

You don't want to look down, naturally.

* * * * *

I had left the Lucky Pierre to search for fossils (I'm David Koontz, the Lucky Pierre's paleontologist). Somewhere off in the darkness on either side of me were Joe Hargraves, gadgeting for mineral deposits, and Ed Reiss, hopefully on the lookout for anything alive. The Lucky Pierre was back of us, her body out of sight behind a low black ridge, only her gleaming nose poking above like a porpoise coming up for air. When I looked back, I could see, along the jagged rim of the ridge, the busy reflected flickerings of the bubble-camp the techs were throwing together. Otherwise all was black, except for our blue-white torch beams that darted here and there over the gritty, rocky surface.

The twenty-nine of us were E.T.I. Team 17, whose assignment was the asteroids. We were four years and three months out of Terra, and we'd reached Vesta right on schedule. Ten minutes after landing, we had known that the clod was part of the crust of Planet X--or Sorn, to give it its right name--one of the few such parts that hadn't been blown clean out of the Solar System.

That made Vesta extra-special. It meant settling down for a while. It meant a careful, months-long scrutiny of Vesta's every square inch and a lot of her cubic ones, especially by the life-scientists. Fossils, artifacts, animate life ... a surface chunk of Sorn might harbor any of these, or all. Some we'd tackled already had a few.

In a day or so, of course, we'd have the one-man beetles and crewboats out, and the floodlights orbiting overhead, and Vesta would be as exposed to us as a molecule on a microscreen. Then work would start in earnest. But in the meantime--and as usual--Hargraves, Reiss and I were out prowling, our weighted boots clomping along in darkness. Captain Feldman had long ago given up trying to keep his science-minded charges from galloping off alone like this. In spite of being a military man, Feld's a nice guy; he just shrugs and says, "Scientists!" when we appear brightly at the airlock, waiting to be let out.

* * * * *

So the three of us went our separate ways, and soon were out of sight of one another. Ed Reiss, the biologist, was looking hardest for animate life, naturally.

But I found it.

* * * * *

I had crossed a long, rounded expanse of rock--lava, wonderfully colored--and was descending into a boulder-cluttered pocket. I was nearing the "bottom" of the chunk, the part that had been the deepest beneath Sorn's surface before the blow-up. It was the likeliest place to look for fossils.

But instead of looking for fossils, my eyes kept rising to those incredible stars. You get that way particularly after several weeks of living in steel; and it was lucky that I got that way this time, or I might have missed the Zen.

My feet tangled with a rock. I started a slow, light-gravity fall, and looked down to catch my balance. My torch beam flickered across a small, red-furred teddy-bear shape. The light passed on. I brought it sharply back to target.

My hair did not stand on end, regardless of what you've heard me quoted as saying. Why should it have, when I already knew Yurt so well--considered him, in fact, one of my closest friends?

The Zen was standing by a rock, one paw resting on it, ears cocked forward, its stubby hind legs braced ready to launch it into flight. Big yellow eyes blinked unemotionally at the glare of the torch, and I cut down its brilliance with a twist of the polarizer lens.

The creature stared at me, looking ready to jump halfway to Mars or straight at me if I made a wrong move.

I addressed it in its own language, clucking my tongue and whistling through my teeth: "Suh, Zen--"

In the blue-white light of the torch, the Zen shivered. It didn't say anything. I thought I knew why. Three thousand years of darkness and silence ...

I said, "I won't hurt you," again speaking in its own language.

The Zen moved away from the rock, but not away from me. It came a little closer, actually, and peered up at my helmeted, mirror-glassed head--unmistakably the seat of intelligence, it appears, of any race anywhere. Its
mouth, almost human-shaped, worked; finally words came. It hadn't spoken, except to itself, for three thousand years.

"You ... are not Zen," it said. "Why--how do you speak Zennacai?"

It took me a couple of seconds to untangle the squeaking syllables and get any sense out of them. What I had already said to it were stock phrases that Yurt had taught me; I knew still more, but I couldn't speak Zennacai fluently by any means. Keep this in mind, by the way: I barely knew the language, and the Zen could barely remember it. To save space, the following dialogue is reproduced without bumbling, blank stares and What-did-you-says? In reality, our talk lasted over an hour.

"I am an Earthman," I said. Through my earphones, when I spoke, I could faintly hear my own voice as the Zen must have heard it in Vesia's all but nonexistent atmosphere: tiny, metallic, cricket-like.

"Eert ... mn?"

I pointed at the sky, the incredible sky. "From out there. From another world."

It thought about that for a while. I waited. We already knew that the Zens had been better astronomers at their peak than we were right now, even though they'd never mastered space travel; so I didn't expect this one to boggle at the notion of creatures from another world. It didn't. Finally it nodded, and I thought, as I had often before, how curious it was that this gesture should be common to Earthmen and Zen.

"So. Eert-mn," it said. "And you know what I am?"

When I understood, I nodded, too. Then I said, "Yes," realizing that the nod wasn't visible through the one-way glass of my helmet.

"I am--last of Zen," it said.

I said nothing. I was studying it closely, looking for the features which Yurt had described to us: the lighter red fur of arms and neck, the peculiar formation of flesh and horn on the lower abdomen. They were there. From the coloring, I knew this Zen was a female.

The mouth worked again—not with emotion, I knew, but with the unfamiliar act of speaking. "I have been here for--for--" she hesitated--"I don't know. For five hundred of my years."

"For about three thousand of mine," I told her.

* * * * *

And then blank astonishment sank home in me—astonishment at the last two words of her remark. I was already familiar with the Zens' enormous intelligence, knowing Yurt as I did ... but imagine thinking to qualify years with my when just out of nowhere a visitor from another planetary orbit pops up! And there had been no special stress given the distinction, just clear, precise thinking, like Yurt's.

I added, still a little awed: "We know how long ago your world died."

"I was child then," she said, "I don't know--what happened. I have wondered." She looked up at my steel-and-glass face; I must have seemed like a giant. Well, I suppose I was. "This--what we are on--was part of Sorn, I know. Was it--" She flubbed for a word--"was it atom explosion?"

I told her how Sorn had gotten careless with its hydrogen atoms and had blown itself over half of creation. (This the E.T.I. Teams had surmised from scientific records found on Eros, as well as from geophysical evidence scattered throughout the other bodies.)

"I was child," she said again after a moment. "But I remember--I remember things different from this. Air ... heat ... light ... how do I live here?"

Again I felt amazement at its intelligence; (and it suddenly occurred to me that astronomy and nuclear physics must have been taught in Sorn's "elementary schools"—else that my years and atom explosion would have been all but impossible). And now this old, old creature, remembering back three thousand years to childhood—probably to those "elementary schools"—remembering, and defining the differences in environment between then and now; and more, wondering at its existence in the different now--

And then I got my own thinking straightened out. I recalled some of the things we had learned about the Zen. Their average lifespan had been 12,000 years or a little over. So the Zen before me was, by our standards, about twenty-five years old. Nothing at all strange about remembering, when you are twenty-five, the things that happened to you when you were seven ... But the Zen's question, even my rationalization of my reaction to it, had given me a chill. Here was no cuddly teddy bear.

This creature had been born before Christ!

She had been alone for three thousand years, on a chip of bone from her dead world beneath a sepulchre of stars. The last and greatest Martian civilization, the L'hrai, had risen and fallen in her lifetime. And she was twenty-five years old.

"How do I live here?" she asked again.
I got back into my own framework of temporal reference, so to speak, and began explaining to a Zen what a Zen was. (I found out later from Yurt that biology, for the reasons which follow, was one of the most difficult studies; so difficult that nuclear physics actually preceded it!) I told her that the Zen had been, all evidence indicated, the toughest, hardest, longest-lived creatures God had ever cooked up: practically independent of their environment, no special ecological niche; just raw, stubborn, tenacious life, developed to a fantastic extreme—a greater force of life than any other known, one that could exist almost anywhere under practically any conditions—even floating in midspace, which, asteroid or no, this Zen was doing right now.

The Zens breathed, all right, but it was nothing they'd had to do in order to live. It gave them nothing their incredible metabolism couldn't scrounge up out of rock or cosmic rays or interstellar gas or simply do without for a few thousand years. If the human body is a furnace, then the Zen body is a feeder pile. Maybe that, I thought, was what evolution always worked toward.

"Please, will you kill me?" the Zen said.

I'd been expecting that. Two years ago, on the bleak surface of Eros, Yurt had asked Engstrom to do the same thing. But I asked, "Why?" although I knew what the answer would be, too.

The Zen looked up at me. She was exhibiting every ounce of emotion a Zen is capable of, which is a lot; and I could recognize it, but not in any familiar terms. A tiny motion here, a quiver there, but very quiet and still for the most part. And that was the violent expression: restraint. Yurt, after two years of living with us, still couldn't understand why we found this confusing.

Difficult, aliens—or being alien.

"I've tried so often to do it myself," the Zen said softly. "But I can't. I can't even hurt myself. Why do I want you to kill me?" She was even quieter. Maybe she was crying. "I'm alone. Five hundred years, Eert-mn—not too long. I'm still young. But what good is it—life—when there are no other Zen?"

"How do you know there are no other Zen?"

"There are no others," she said almost inaudibly. I suppose a human girl might have shrieked it.

A child, I thought, when your world blew up. And you survived. Now you're a young three-thousand-year-old woman ... uneducated, afraid, probably crawling with neuroses. Even so, in your thousand-year terms, young lady, you're not too old to change.

"Will you kill me?" she asked again.

And suddenly I was having one of those eye-popping third-row-center views of the whole scene: the enormous, beautiful sky; the dead clod, Vesta; the little creature who stood there staring at me—the brilliant-ignorant, humanlike-alien, old-young creature who was asking me to kill her.

For a moment the human quality of her thinking terrified me ... the feeling you might have waking up some night and finding your pet puppy sitting on your chest, looking at you with wise eyes and white fangs gleaming ...

Then I thought of Yurt—smart, friendly Yurt, who had learned to laugh and wisecrack—and I came out of the jeebies. I realized that here was only a sick girl, no tiny monster. And if she were as resilient as Yurt ... well, it was his problem. He'd probably pull her through.

But I didn't pick her up. I made no attempt to take her back to the ship. Her tiny white teeth and tiny yellow claws were harder than steel; and she was, I knew, unbelievably strong for her size. If she got suspicious or decided to throw a phobic tizzy, she could scatter shreds of me over a square acre of Vesta in less time than it would take me to yelp.

"Will you—" she began again.

I tried shakily, "Hell, no. Wait here." Then I had to translate it.

I went back to the Lucky Pierre and got Yurt. We could do without him, even though he had been a big help. We'd taught him a lot—he'd been a child at the blow-up, too—and he'd taught us a lot. But this was more important, of course.

When I told him what had happened, he was very quiet; crying, perhaps, just like a human being, with happiness.

Cap Feldman asked me what was up, and I told him, and he said, "Well, I'll be blessed!"

I said, "Yurt, are you sure you want us to keep hands off ... just go off and leave you?"

"Yes, please."

Feldman said, "Well, I'll be blessed."

Yurt, who spoke excellent English, said, "Bless you all."

I took him back to where the female waited. From the ridge, I knew, the entire crew was watching through binocs. I set him down, and he fell to studying her intently.
"I am not a Zen," I told her, giving my torch full brilliance for the crew's sake, "but Yurt here is. Do you see ... I mean, do you know what you look like?"

She said, "I can see enough of my own body to--and--yes ..."

"Yurt," I said, "here's the female we thought we might find. Take over."

Yurt's eyes were fastened on the girl.

"What--do I do now?" she whispered worriedly.

"I'm afraid that's something only a Zen would know," I told her, smiling inside my helmet. "I'm not a Zen. Yurt is."

She turned to him. "You will tell me?"

"If it becomes necessary." He moved closer to her, not even looking back to talk to me. "Give us some time to get acquainted, will you, Dave? And you might leave some supplies and a bubble at the camp when you move on, just to make things pleasanter."

By this time he had reached the female. They were as still as space, not a sound, not a motion. I wanted to hang around, but I knew how I'd feel if a Zen, say, wouldn't go away if I were the last man alive and had just met the last woman.

I moved my torch off them and headed back for the Lucky Pierre. We all had a drink to the saving of a great race that might have become extinct. Ed Reiss, though, had to do some worrying before he could down his drink.

"If they don't like each other?" he asked anxiously.

"They don't have much choice," Captain Feldman said, always the realist. "Why do homely women fight for jobs on the most isolated space outposts?"

"That's right. They look awful good after a year or two in space."

"Make that twenty-five by Zen standards or three thousand by ours," said Joe Hargraves, "and I'll bet they look beautiful to each other."

We decided to drop our investigation of Vesta for the time being, and come back to it after the honeymoon.

Six months later, when we returned, there were twelve hundred Zen on Vesta!

Captain Feldman was a realist but he was also a deeply moral man. He went to Yurt and said, "It's indecent! Couldn't the two of you control yourselves at least a little? Twelve hundred kids!"

"We were rather surprised ourselves," Yurt said complacently. "But this seems to be how Zen reproduce. Can you have only half a child?"

Naturally, Feld got the authorities to quarantine Vesta. Good God, the Zen could push us clear out of the Solar System in a couple of generations!

I don't think they would, but you can't take such chances, can you?

Contents

SAY "HELLO" FOR ME
by Frank W. Coggins

Twenty years is a long time to live in anticipation. At least, Professor Pettibone thought so--until the twenty years were up.

This was to be the day, but of course Professor Pettibone had no way of knowing it. He arose, as he had been doing for the previous twenty years, donned the tattered remnants of his space suit, and went out into the open. He stood erect, bronzed, magnificent, faced distant Earth, and recited:

"Good morning, bright sunshine, We're glad you are here. You make the world happy, And bring us good cheer."

It was something he had heard as a child and, isolated here on Mars, he had remembered it and used it to keep from losing his power of speech.

The ritual finished, he walked to the edge of the nearest canal, and gathered a bushel or so of dried Martian moss. He returned and began polishing the shiny exterior of the wrecked space ship. It had to really glitter if it was to be an effective beacon in guiding the rescue ship.

Professor Pettibone knew--had known for years--that a ship would come. It was just a matter of time, and as the years slipped by, his faith diminished not a whit.

With his task half completed, he glanced up at the sun and quickened the polishing. It was a long walk to the
place the berry bushes grew, and if he arrived too late, the sun would have dried out the night's crop of fragile
berries and he would wait until the morrow for nourishment.

But on this day, he was fated to arrive at the bush area not at all, because an alien sound from above again drew
the Professor's eyes from his work, and he knew that the day had arrived.

The ship was three times as large as any he had ever visualized, and its futuristic design told him, sharply, how
far he had fallen behind in his dreaming. He smiled and, quite calmly, "I daresay I am about to be rescued."

And he experienced a thrill as the great ship set down and two men emerged therefrom. A thrill tinged with a
guilt-sense, because emotional experiences were rare in an isolated life and seemed somehow indecent.

The two men held weapons. They advanced upon Professor Pettibone, looked up into his face, reflected a
certain wary hostility. That the hostility was tinged with instinctive respect, even awe, made it no less potent.

One of them asked, "Fella--man came in ship--sky boat--long time ago. Him dead? Where?" Appropriate
gestures accompanied the words.

Professor Pettibone smiled down at the little men and bowed. "You are of course referring to me. I came in the
ship. I am Professor Pettibone. It was nice of you to hunt me up."

The eyes of the two Terran spacemen met and locked in startled inquiry. One of them voiced the reaction of
both when he said, "What the hell--"

"You no doubt are curious as to the fate of the other members of the expedition. They were killed, all save
Fletcher, who lasted a week." Professor Pettibone waved a hand. "There--in the graveyard."

But their eyes remained on the only survivor of that ill-fated first expedition. It was hard to accept him as the
man they sought, but, faced with undeniable similarity between what they expected and what they had found, the
two spacemen had no alternative.

"I hope your food supply is ample--and varied," Professor Pettibone said.

This seemed to bring them out of their bemusement. "Of course, Professor. Would you care to come aboard?"

The other made a try at congenial levity. "You must be pretty hungry after twenty years."

"Really--has it been that long? I tried to keep track at first...."

"We can blast off anytime you say. You're probably pretty anxious to get back."

"Indeed, I am. The changes, in twenty years--must be breathtaking. I wonder if they'll remember me?"

A short time later, the Professor said, "It's amazing. A ship of this size handled by only two men." Then he sat
down to a repast laid out by one of the awed spacemen.

But, after nibbling a bit of this, a forkful of that, he found that satisfaction lay in the anticipation more so than
in the eating.

"We'll look around and see what we can find in the way of clothing for you, Professor," one of the spacemen
said. Then the man's bemusement returned. His eyes traveled over the magnificent physique before him. The perfect
giant of a man; the great, Apollo-like head with the calm, clear eyes; the expression of complete contentment and
serenity.

The space man said, "Professor--to what do you attribute the changes in your body. What is there about this
planet--?"

"I really don't know." Professor Pettibone looked down his torso with an impersonal eye. "I think the greenish
skin pigmentation is a result of mineral-heavy vapors that occur during certain seasons. The growth. As to my body-
I really don't know."

But the two spacemen, though they didn't refer to it--were not concerned with the body so much as the aura of
completeness, the radiation of contentment which came from somewhere within.

And it was passing strange that nothing more was said about the Professor returning to Earth. No great
revelation, suddenly arrived at, that he would not go. Rather, they discussed various things, that three gentlemen,
meeting casually, would discuss.

Then Professor Pettibone arose from his chair and said, "It was kind of you to drop off and see me."

And one of the spacemen replied, "A pleasure, sir. A real pleasure indeed."

Then the Professor left the ship and watched it lift up on a tail of red fire and go away. He raised an arm and
waved. "Say 'hello' for me," he called. Then he turned away and, from force of habit, he began again to polish the
hull, knowing that he would keep it shining, and be proud of it, for many years to come.

Almost beyond reach of the planet, one of the spacemen flipped a switch and put certain sensitive
communication mechanisms to work. So sensitive, they could pick up etheric vibrations far away and make them
audible.

But only faintly, came the pleasant voice of a contented man:

"Good morning, bright sunshine, We're glad you are here. You make the world ..."
It's not always "The Truth shall set you free!" Sometimes it's "Want of the Truth shall drive you to escape!"
And that can be dangerous!

Mryna Brill intended to ride the god-car above the rain mist. For a long time she had not believed in the taboos or the Earth-god. She no longer believed she lived on Earth. This paradise of green-floored forests and running brooks was something called Rythar.

Six years ago, when Mryna was fourteen, she first discovered the truth. She asked a question and the Earth-god ignored it. A simple question, really: What is above the rain mist? God could have told her. Every day he answered technical questions that were far more difficult. Instead, he repeated the familiar taboo about avoiding the Old Village because of the Sickness.

And consequently Mryna, being female, went to the Old Village. There was nothing really unusual about that. All the kids went through the ruins from time to time. They had worked out a sort of charm that made it all right. They ran past the burned out shells of the old houses and they kept their eyes shaded to ward off the Sickness.

But even at fourteen Mryna had outgrown charms and she didn't believe in the Sickness. She had once asked the Earth-god what sickness meant, and the screen in the answer house had given her a very detailed answer. Mryna knew that none of the hundred girls and thirty boys inhabiting Rythar had ever been sick. That, like the taboo of the Old Village, she considered a childish superstition.

The Old Village wasn't large--three parallel roads, a mile long, lined with the charred ruins of prefabs, which were exactly like the cottages where the kids lived. It was nothing to inspire either fear or legend. The village had burned a long time ago; the grass from the forest had grown a green mantle over the skeletal walls.

For weeks Mryna poked through the ruins before she found anything of significance--a few, scorched pages of a printed pamphlet buried deep in the black earth. The paper excited her tremendously. It was different from the film books photographed in the answer house. She had never touched anything like it; and it seemed wonderful stuff.

She read the pamphlet eagerly. It was part of a promotional advertisement of a world called Rythar, "the jewel of the Sirian Solar System."

The description made it obvious that Rythar was the green paradise where Mryna lived--the place she had been taught to call Earth. And the pamphlet had been addressed to "Earthmen everywhere."

Mryna made her second find when she was fifteen, a textbook in astronomy. For the first time in her life she read about the spinning dust of the universe lying beyond the eternal rain mist that hid her world.

The solid, stable Earth of her childhood was solid and stable no longer, but a sphere turning through a black void. Nor was it properly called Earth, but a planet named Rythar. The adjustment Mryna had to make was shattering; she lost faith in everything she believed.

Yet the clock-work logic of astronomy appealed to her orderly mind. It explained why the rain mist glowed with light during the day and turned dark at night. Mryna had never seen a clear sky. She had no visual data to tie her new concept to.

For six years she kept the secret. She hid the papers and the astronomy text which she found in the Old Village. Later, after the metal men came, she destroyed everything so none of the other women would know the Earth-god was a man.

At first she kept the secret because she was afraid. For some reason the man who played at being god wanted the kids to believe Rythar was Earth, the totality of the universe enveloped in a cloud of mist. She knew that because she once asked god what a planet was. The face on the screen in the answer house became frigid with anger--or was it fear?--and the Earth-god said:

"The word means nothing."

But late that night a very large god-car brought six metal men down through the rain mist. They were huge, jointed things that clanked when they walked. Four of them used weapons to herd the kids together in their small settlement. The two others went to the Old Village and blasted the ruins with high explosives.
Vaguely Mryna remembered that the metal men had been there before, when the kids were still very small. They had built the new settlement and they had brought food. They lived with the children for a long time, she thought—but the memory was hazy.

As the years passed, Mryna's fear retreated and only one thing became important: she knew the Earth-god was a man. On the fertile soil of Rythar there were one hundred women and thirty men. All the boys had taken mates before they reached seventeen. Seventy girls were left unmarried, with no prospect of ever having husbands. A score or more became second wives in polygamous homes, but plural marriage had no appeal for Mryna. She was firmly determined to possess a man of her own. And why shouldn't it be the Earth-god?

As her first step toward escape, Mryna volunteered for duty in the answer house. For as long as she could remember, the answer house had stood on a knoll some distance beyond the new settlement. It was a square, one-room building, housing a speaking box, a glass screen and a console of transmission machinery. Anyone in the settlement could contact god and request information or special equipment.

God went out of his way to deluge them with information. The simplest question produced voluminous data, transmitted over the screen and photographed on reels of film. Someone had to be in the answer house to handle the photography. The work was not hard, but it was monotonous. Most of the kids preferred to farm the fields or dig the sacrificial ore.

A request for equipment was granted just as promptly. Tools, machines, seeds, fertilizers, packaged buildings, games, clothing—everything came in a god-car. It was a large cylinder which hissed down from the rain mist on a pillar of fire. The landing site was a flat, charred field near the answer house. Unless the equipment was unusually heavy, the attendant stationed in the house was expected to unload the god-car and pile aboard the sacrifice ores mined on Rythar.

God asked two things from the settlement: the pieces of unusually heavy metal which they dug from the hills, and tiny vials of soil. In an hour's time they could mine enough ore to fill the compartment of a god-car, and god never complained if they sometimes sent the cylinder back empty. But he fussied mightily over the small vials of Earth. He gave very explicit directions as to where they were to take the samples, and the place was never the same. Sometimes they had to travel miles from the settlement to satisfy that inexplicable whim.

For two weeks Mryna patiently ran off the endless films of new books and unloaded the god-car when it came. She examined the interior of the cylinder carefully and she weighed every possible risk. The compartment was very small, but she concluded that she would be safe.

And so she made her decision. Tense and tight-lipped Mryna Brill slipped aboard the god-car. She sealed the lock door, which automatically fired the launching tubes. After that there was no turning back.

The dark compartment shook in a thunder of sound. The weight of the escape speed tore at her body, pulling her tight against the confining walls. She lost consciousness until the pressure lessened.

The metal walls became hot but the space was too confining for her to avoid contact entirely. Four narrow light tubes came on, with a dull, red glow, and suddenly a gelatinous liquid emptied out of ceiling vents. The fluid sprayed every exposed surface in the cubicle, draining through the shipment of sacrifice ores at Mryna's feet. It had a choking, antiseptic odor; it stung Mryna's face and inflamed her eyes.

Worse still, as the liquid soaked into her clothing, it disintegrated the fiber, tearing away the cloth in long strips which slowly dissolved in the liquid on the floor. Before the antiseptic spray ceased, Mryna was helplessly naked. Even her black boots had not survived.

The red lights went out and Mryna was imprisoned again in the crushing darkness. A terror of the taboos she had defied swept her mind. She began to scream, but the sound was lost in the roar of the motors.

Suddenly it was over. The god-car lurched into something hard. Mryna was thrown against the ceiling—and she hung there, weightless. The pieces of sacrifice ore were floating in the darkness just as she was. The motors cut out and the lock door swung open.

Mryna saw a circular room, brightly lighted with a glaring, blue light. The nature of her fear changed. This was the house of the Earth-god, but she could not let him find her naked.

She tried to run into the circular room. She found that the slightest exertion of her muscles sent her spinning through the air. She could not get her feet on the floor. There was no down and no up in that room. She collided painfully with the metal wall and she snatched at a light bracket to keep herself from bouncing free in the empty air again.

The god-car had landed against what was either the ceiling or the floor of the circular room. Mryna had no way of making a differentiation. Eight brightly lighted corridors opened into the side walls. Mryna heard footsteps moving toward her down one of the corridors; she pulled herself blindly into another. As she went farther from the circular room, a vague sense of gravity returned. At the end of the corridor she was able to stand on her feet again, although she still had to walk very carefully. Any sudden movement sent her soaring in a graceful leap that banged
her head against the ceiling.

Cautiously she opened a thick, metal door into another hall—and she stood transfixed, looking through a mica wall at the emptiness of space pinpointed with its billions of stars. This was the reality of the charts she had seen in the astronomy text: that knowledge alone saved her sanity. She had believed it when the proof lay hidden above the rain mist; she must believe it now.

From where she stood, she was able to see the place where the god-car had brought her—like a vast cartwheel spinning in the void. The god-car was clamped against the hub, from which eight corridors radiated outward like wheel spokes toward the rim. Far below the gigantic wheel Mryna saw the sphere of Rythar, invisible behind its shroud of glowing mist.

She moved along the rim corridor, past the mica wall, until she came to a door that stood open. The room beyond was a sleeping compartment and it was empty. She searched it for clothing, and found nothing. She went through four more dormitory rooms before she came upon anything she could use—brief shorts, clearly made for a man, and a loose, white tunic. It wasn't suitable; it wasn't the way she wanted to be dressed when she faced him. But it had to do.

Mryna was pawing through a footlocker looking for boots when she heard a hesitant step behind her. She whirled and saw a small, stooped, white-haired man, naked except for trunks like the ones she was wearing. The wrinkled skin on his wasted chest was burned brown by the hot glare of the sun. Thick-lensed glasses hung from a chain around his neck.

"My dear young lady," he said in a tired voice, "this is a men's ward!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know--"

"You must be a new patient." He fumbled for his glasses. Instinctively she knew she shouldn't let him see her clearly enough to identify her as a stranger. She shoved past him, knocking the glasses from his hand.

"I'd better find my own—ward." Mryna didn't know the word, but she supposed it meant some sort of sleeping chamber.

The old man said chattily, "I hadn't heard they were bringing in any new patients today."

She was in the corridor by that time. He reached for her hand. "I'll see you in the sunroom?" It was a timid, hopeful question. "And you'll tell me all the news—everything they're doing back on Earth. I haven't been home for almost a year."

She fled down the hall. When she heard voices ahead of her, she pulled back a door and slid into another room—a storeroom piled with cases of medicines. Behind the cartons she thought she would be safe.

This wasn't what she had expected. Mryna thought there might be one man living in a kind of prefab somehow suspended above the rain mist. But there were obviously others up here; she didn't know how many. And the old man frightened her—more than the dazzling sight of the heavens visible through the mica wall. Mryna had never seen physical age before. No one on Rythar was older than she was herself—a sturdy, healthy, lusty twenty. The old man's infirmity disgusted her; for the first time in her life she was conscious of the slow decay of death.

The door of the supply room slid open. Mryna crouched low behind the cartons, but she was able to see the man and the woman who had entered the room. A woman—here? Mryna hadn't considered that possibility. Perhaps the Earth-god already had a mate.

The newcomers were dressed in crisp, white uniforms; the woman wore a starched, white hat. They carried a tray of small, glass cylinders from which metal needles projected. While the woman held the tray, the man drove the needles through the caps of small bottles and filled the cylinders with a bright-colored liquid.

"When are you leaving, Dick?" the woman asked.

"In about forty minutes. They're sending an auto-pickup."

"Oh, no!"

"Now don't start worrying. They have got the bugs out of it by this time. The auto-pickups are entirely trustworthy."

"Sure, that's what the army says."

"In theory they should be even more reliable than--"

"I wish you'd wait for the hospital shuttle."

"And miss the chance to address Congress this year? We've worked too long for this; I don't want to miff it now. We've all the statistical proof we need, even to convince those pinchpenny halfwits. During the past eight years we've handled more than a thousand cases up here. On Earth they were pronounced incurable; we've sent better than eighty per cent back in good health after an average stay of fourteen months."

"No medical man has ever questioned the efficiency of cosmic radiation and a reduced atmospheric gravity, Dick."

"It's just our so-called statesmen, always yapping about the budget. But this time we have the cost problem
licked, too. For a year and a half the ore they send up from Rythar has paid for our entire operation."

"I didn't know that."

"We've kept it under wraps, so the politicians wouldn't cut our appropriations."

Their glass tubes were full, and they turned toward the door. "It isn't right," the woman persisted, "for them not to send a piloted shuttle after you, Dick. It isn't dignified. You're our assistant medical director and--"

Her words were cut off as the door slid shut behind them. Mryna tried to fit this new information into what she already knew—or thought she knew—about the Earth-god. It didn't add up to a pretty picture. She had once asked for a definition of illness, and it was apparent to her that this place which they called the Guardian Wheel was an expensive hospital for Earthmen. It was paid for by the sacrificial ores mined on Rythar. In a sense, Rythar was being enslaved and exploited by Earth. True, it was not difficult to dig out the ore, but Mryna resented the fact that the kids on Rythar had not been told the truth. She had long ago lost her awe of the man called god; now she lost her respect as well.

Mryna was glad she had not seen him, glad no one knew she was aboard the Guardian Wheel. She would return to Rythar. After she told the others what she knew, Rythar would send up no more sacrifice ores. Let the Earthmen come down and mine it for themselves!

Very cautiously she pulled the door open. The rim corridor was empty. She moved toward one of the intersecting corridors. When she heard footsteps, she hid in another dormitory room.

This was different from the others. It showed more evidence of permanent occupation. She guessed it was a dormitory for the people who took care of the sick. Pictures were fastened to the curved, metal walls. Personal articles cluttered the shelves hung beside the bunks. On a writing desk she saw a number of typed reports. Five freshly laundered uniforms, identical to the one she had lost in the antiseptic wash, hung on a rack behind the door. Mryna stripped off the makeshift she was wearing and put on one of the uniforms; she found boots under the desk. When she was dressed, she stood admiring herself in the polished surface of the metal door.

She was a handsome woman, and she was very conscious of that. Her face was tanned by the mist-filtered sunlight of Rythar; her lips were red and sensuous; her long, platinum-colored hair fell to her shoulders. She compared herself to the small, hard-faced female she had seen in the supply room. Was that a typical Earthwoman? Mryna's lips curled in a scornful smile. Let the gods come down to Rythar, then, and discover what a real female was like in the lush, green, Rytharian paradise.

Mryna went to the desk and glanced at the typed reports. They had been written by a man who signed himself "Commander in Charge, Guardian Wheel," and they were addressed to the Congress of the world government. One typed document was a supply inventory; a second, still unfinished, was a budget report. (You won't show a profit next time, Mryna thought vindictively, when we stop sending you the sacrifice ore.) Another report dealt with Rythar, and Mryna read it with more interest.

One paragraph caught her attention,

"We have asked for soil samples to be taken from an area covering ten thousand square miles. Our chemical analysis has been thorough, and we find nothing that could be remotely harmful to human life. Atmospheric samples produce the same negative results. On the other hand, we have direct evidence that no animal life has ever evolved on Rythar; the life cycle is exclusively botanical."

The soil samples, Mryna realized, would be the vials of Earth which the Earth-god had requested so often. Were the Earthmen planning to move their hospital down to Rythar? That idea disturbed her. Mryna did not want her garden world cluttered up with a lot of sick, old men discarded by Earth.

She turned to the second page of the report. "The original colony survived for a year. The Sickness in the Old Village developed only after the first harvest of Rytharian-grown food. It is more and more evident that the botanical cycle of Rythar must be examined before we find the answer. To do that adequately, we shall have to send survey teams to the surface; that requires much larger appropriations for research than we have had in the past. The metal immunization suits, which must, of course, be destroyed after each expedition--"

"And what, may I ask, is the meaning of this?"

Mryna dropped the report and swung toward the door. She saw a woman standing there—another hard-faced Earthwoman, with a starched, white cap perched on her graying hair.

"I must have come to the wrong room," Mryna said in a small voice.

"Indeed! Everyone knows this is command headquarters. Who are you?" The woman put her hand on Mryna's arm, and the fingers bit through the uniform into Mryna's flesh.

Mryna pulled away, drawing her shoulders back proudly. Why should she feel afraid? She stood a head taller than this dried up stranger; she knew the Earthwoman's strength would be no match for hers.

"My name is Mryna Brill," she said quietly. "I came up in a god-car from Rythar."

"Rythar?" The woman's mouth fell open. She whispered the word as if it were profanity. Suddenly she turned
and ran down the rim corridor, screaming in terror.

She's afraid of me! Mryna thought. And that made no sense at all.

Mryna knew she had to get back to the god-car quickly. Since the Earthmen had built up the taboos in order to get their sacrifice ores from Rythar, they would do everything they could to prevent her return. She ran toward an intersecting spoke corridor. An alarm bell began to clang, and the sound vibrated against the metal walls. An armed man sprang from a side room and fired his weapon at Mryna. The discharge burned a deep groove in the wall.

So they would even kill her--these men who pretended to be gods!

Before the man could fire again, Mryna swung down a side corridor, and at once the sensation of weightlessness overtook her. She could not move quickly. She saw the armed man at the mouth of the corridor. Frantically she pushed open the door of a room, which was crowded with consoles of transmission machines. Three men were seated in front of the speakers. They jumped and came toward her, clumsily fighting the weightlessness.

Mryna caught at the door jamb and swung herself toward the ceiling. At the same time the armed man fired. The discharge missed her and washed against the transmission machinery. Blue fire exploded from the room. The three men screamed in agony. Concussion threw Mryna helplessly toward the rim again.

And the Guardian Wheel was plunged into darkness. Mryna's head swam; her shoulder seethed with pain where she had banged into the wall. She tried to creep toward the circular room, but she had lost her sense of direction and she found herself back on the rim.

The clanging bell had stopped when the lights went out, but Mryna heard the panic of frightened voices. Far away someone was screaming. Running feet clattered toward her. Mryna flattened herself against the outer wall. An indistinct body of men shot past her.

"From Rythar," one of them was saying. "A woman from Rythar!"

"And we've blasted the communication center. We've no way of sending the warning back to Earth--"

They were gone.

Mryna moved back into the spoke corridor. She felt her way silently toward the circular hub room and the god-car. Suddenly very close she heard voices which she recognized--the man and the woman who had been talking in the supply room.

"You're still all right, Dick," the woman said. "She hasn't been here long enough to--"

"We don't know that. We don't know how it spreads or how quickly. We can't take the chance."

"Then ... then we've no choice?" Her voice was a small whisper, choked with terror.

"None. These have been standing emergency orders for twenty years. We always faced the possibility that one of them would escape. If we'd been allowed to use a different policy of education--but the politicians wouldn't permit that. The Wheel has to be destroyed, and we must die with it."

"Couldn't we wait and make sure?"

"It works too fast. None of us would be able to do the job--afterward."

The voices moved away. Mryna floated toward the hub room. She found the air lock and pulled herself into the god-car. The metal lock hissed closed and light came on. Then she knew she had made a mistake. This ship was not the one she had used when she came up from Rythar. The tiny cabin was fitted with a sleeping lounge, a food cabinet and a file of reading films. Above the lounge a mica viewplate gave her a broad view of the sky.

Mryna remembered that the man in the supply room had said he was waiting for an auto-pickup; he was on his way back to Earth. Mryna had taken his ship instead of her own. In panic she tried to open the door again, but she found no way to do it. Machinery beneath her feet began to hum. She felt a slight lurch as the pickup left the hub of the Guardian Wheel.

It swung in a wide arc. Through the viewplate she saw the enormous Wheel growing small behind her, silhouetted against the mist of Rythar. Suddenly the wheel glowed red with a soundless explosion. Its flaming fragments died in the void.

Mryna dropped weakly on the lounge. Nausea spun through her mind. The man had said they would destroy themselves. Because Mryna had come aboard? But why were they afraid of her? What possible harm could she do them? Mryna had left Rythar to discover the truth, and the truth was insanity. Was truth always like this--a bitter disillusionment, an empty horror?

She had something else to say to the people of Rythar now: not that the gods were men, but that men were mad. Believe in the taboos; send up the sacrificial ores. It was a small price to pay to keep that madness away from Rythar.

And Mryna knew she could not go back. With the Wheel gone, she could never return to Rythar; the auto-pickup was carrying her inexorably toward Earth. The scream of the machinery slowly turned shrill, hammering against her eardrums. The stars visible in the viewplate blurred and winked out. Mryna felt a twist of vertigo as the shuttle shifted from conventional speed into a time warp. And then the sound was gone. The ship was floating in an
impenetrable blackness.

Mryna had no idea how much time passed subjectively. When she became hungry, she took food from the cabinet. She slept when she was tired. To pass the time, she turned the reading films through the projector.

Most of the film stored in the shuttle covered material Mryna already knew. The Earthmen, clearly, had not denied any information to Rythar. Only one thing had been restricted--astronomy. And that would have made no difference, if Mryna had not found the text in the ruins of the Old Village. The people on Rythar never saw the stars; they had no way of knowing--or caring--what lay above the rain mist.

Mryna was more interested in the history of Earth, which she had never known before. She studied the pictures of the great industrial centers and the crowded countryside. She was awed by the mobs in the city streets and the towering buildings. Yet she liked her own world more--the forests and the clear-running brooks; the vast, uncrowded, open spaces.

It puzzled her that the people of Earth would give the Rytharian paradise to a handful of children, when their own world was so overcrowded. Was this another form of the madness that had driven the people in the Wheel to destroy themselves? That made a convenient explanation, yet Mryna's mind was too logical to accept it.

One film referred to the founding of the original colony on Rythar, a planet in the Sirian System which had been named for its discoverer. Rythar, according to the film, was one of a score of colonies established by Earth. It was unbelievably rich in deposits of uranium.

That, Mryna surmised, was the name of the sacrificial ore they sent up in the god-cars.

The atmosphere and gravity of Rythar duplicated that of Earth; Rythar should have become the largest colony in the system. The government of Earth had originally planned a migration of ten million persons.

"But after twelve months the survey colony was destroyed by an infection," Mryna read on the projection screen, "which has never been identified. It is called simply the Sickness. The origin of this plague is unknown. No adult in the survey colony survived; children born on Rythar are themselves immune, but are carriers of the Sickness. The first rescue team sent to save them died within eight hours. No human being, aside from these native-born children, has ever survived the Sickness."

Now Mryna had the whole truth. She knew the motivation for their madness of self-destruction. It was not insanity, but the sublime courage of a few human beings sacrificing themselves to save the rest of their civilization. They smashed the Guardian Wheel to keep the Sickness there. And Mryna had already escaped before that happened! She was being hurled through space toward Earth and she would destroy that, too.

If she killed herself, that would in no way alter the situation. The ship would still move in its appointed course. Her body would be aboard; perhaps the very furnishings in the cabin were now infected with the germ of the Sickness. When the ship touched Earth, the fatal poison would escape.

Dully Mryna turned up another frame on the film, and she read what the Earthmen had done to help Rythar. They built the Guardian Wheel to isolate the Sickness. Sealed in metal immunization suits, volunteers had descended to the plague world and reared the surviving children of the colonists until they were old enough to look out for themselves. The answer house had been set up as an instructional device.

"As nearly as possible, the scientists in charge attempted to create a normal social situation for the plague carriers. They could never be allowed to leave Rythar, but when they matured enough to know the truth, Rythar could be integrated into the colonial system. Rytharian uranium is already a significant trade factor in the colonial market. An incidental by-product of the Guardian Wheel is the hospital facility, where advanced cases of certain cancers and lung diseases have been cured in a reduced gravity or by exposure to cosmic radiation."

Mryna shut off the projection. The words made sense, but the results did not. And she knew precisely why Earth had failed. When they matured--in those three words she had her answer.

And now it didn't matter. There was nothing she could do. Her ship was a poisoned arrow aimed directly at the heart of man's civilization.

Mryna had slept twice when the auto-pickup lurched out of the time drive and she was able to see the stars again. Directly ahead of her she saw an emerald planet, bright in the sun. And she knew instinctively that it was Earth.

A speaker under the viewport throbbed with the sound of a human voice.

"Auto-shuttle SC 539, attention. You are assigned landing slot seven-three-one, Port Chicago. I repeat, seven-three-one. Dial that destination. Do you read me?"

Three times the message was repeated before Mryna concluded that it was meant for her. She found three small knobs close to the speaker and a plastic toggle labeled "voice reply." She snapped it shut and found that she could speak to the Chicago spaceport.

Her problem was easily solved, then. She could say she came from Rythar. Without hesitation, Earth ships would be sent to blast her ship out of the sky before she would be able to land. But she knew she had to accomplish
more than that; the same mistake must not be repeated again.
"How much time do I have?" she asked.
"Thirty-four minutes."
"Can you keep this shuttle up here any longer than that?"
"Lady, the auto-pickups are on tape-pilot. Come hell or high water, they land exactly on schedule."
"What happens if I don't dial the slot destination?"
"We bring you in on emergency--and you fork over a thousand buck fine."

Mryna asked to be allowed to speak to someone in authority in the government. The Chicago port manager told
her the request was absurd. For nine minutes Mryna argued, with a mounting sense of urgency, before he gave his
grudging consent. Her trouble was that she had to skate close to the truth without admitting it directly. She could
not--except as a last resort--let them kill her until they knew why the isolation of Rythar had failed.

It was thirteen minutes before landing when Mryna finally heard an older, more dignified voice on the speaker.
By then the green globe of Earth filled the sky; Mryna could make out the shapes of the continents turning below
her. The older man identified himself as a senator elected to the planetary Congress. She didn't know how much
authority he represented, but she couldn't afford to wait any longer.

She told him frankly who she was. She knew she was pronouncing her own death sentence, yet she spoke
quietly. She must show the same courage that the Earthmen had when they sacrificed themselves in the Guardian
Wheel.

"Listen to me for two minutes more before you blast my ship," she asked. "I rode the god-car up from Rythar--I
am coming now to spread the Sickness on Earth--because I wanted to know the truth about something that puzzled
me. I had to know what was above the rain mist. In the answer house you would not tell us that. Now I understand
why. We were children. You were waiting for us to mature. And that is the mistake you made; that blindness nearly
destroyed your civilization.

"You will have to build another Guardian Wheel. This time don't hide anything from us because we're children.
The truth makes us mature, not illusions or taboos. Never forget that. It is easier to face a fact than to have to give up
dreams we've been taught to believe. Tell your children the truth when they ask for it. Tell us, please. We can adjust
to it. We're just as human as you are."

Mryna drew a long breath. Her lips were trembling. Did this man understand what she had tried to say? She
would never know. If she failed, Earth--in spite of its generosity and its courage--would one day be destroyed by
children bred on too many delusions. "I'm ready," Mryna said steadily. "Send up your warships and destroy me."

She waited. Less than ten minutes were left. Her shuttle began to move more slowly. She was no more than a
mile above Earth. She saw the soaring cities and the white highways twisting through green fields.

Seven minutes left. Where were the warships? She looked anxiously through the viewport and the sky was
empty.

Desperately she closed the voice toggle again. "Send them quickly!" she cried. "You must not let me land!"

No reply came from the speaker. Her auto-shuttle began to circle a large city which lay at the southern tip of an
inland lake. Three minutes more. The ship nosed toward the spaceport.

"Why don't you do something?" Mryna screamed. "What are you waiting for?"

The shuttle settled into a metal rack. The lock hissed open. Mryna shrank back against the wall, looking out at
what she would destroy--what she had already destroyed. A dignified, portly man came panting up the ramp toward
her.

"No!" she whispered. "Don't come in here."

"I am Senator Brieson," he said shortly. "For ten years Dr. Jameson has been telling us from the Guardian
Wheel that we should adopt a different educational policy toward Rythar. Your scare broadcast was clever, but we're
used to Jameson's tricks. He'll be removed from office for this, and if I have anything to say about it--"

"You didn't believe me?" Mryna gasped.

"Of course not. If a plague carrier escaped from Rythar, we would have heard about it long before this. The
trouble with you scientists is you don't grant the rest of us any common sense. And Jameson's the worst of the lot.
He's always contended that the sociologists should determine our Rytharian policy, not the elected representatives
of the people."

Mryna broke down and began to cry hysterically. The senator put his hand under her arm--none too gently.
"Let's have no more dramatics, please. You don't know how fortunate you are, young lady. If the politicians were as
addle-witted as you scientists claim we are, we might have believed that nonsense and blasted your ship out of the
sky. You scientists have to give up the notion that you're our guardians; we're quite able to look out for ourselves."
At three-fifteen, a young man walked into the circular brick building and took a flattened package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

"Mr. Stern?" he asked, throwing away the empty package.

Stern looked with hard eyes at the youthful reporter. He recognized the type.

"So they're sending around cubs now," he said.

"I'm no cub--I've been on the paper a whole year," the reporter protested, and then stopped, realizing his annoyance had betrayed him.

"Only a year. The first time they sent their best man."

"This ain't the first time," said the young man, assuming a bored look. "It's the fourth time, and next year I don't think anybody will come at all. Why should they?"

"Why, because they might be able to make it," Beryl spoke up. "Something must have happened before."

Stern watched the reporter drink in Beryl's loveliness.

"Well, Mrs. Curtis," the young man said, "everyone has it figured out that Dr. Curtis got stuck in the fourth dimension, or else lost, or died, maybe. Even Einstein can't work out the stellar currents your husband was depending on."

"It's very simple," replied Beryl, "but I can't explain it intelligibly. I wish you could have talked to Dr. Curtis."

"Why is it that we have to come out here just once a year to wait for him? Is that how the fourth dimension works?"

"It's the only time when the stellar currents permit the trip back to Earth. And it's not the fourth dimension! Clyde was always irritated when anyone would talk about his traveling to Mars in the fourth dimension."

"It's interdimensional," Stern put in.

"And you're his broker?" asked the reporter, throwing his cigarette down on the brick floor and stepping on it. "You're his old friend from college days, handled his financial affairs, and helped him raise enough money to build his machine?"

"Yes," Stern replied, a little pompously. "It was through my efforts that several wealthy men took an interest in the machine, so that Dr. Curtis did not have to bear the entire expense himself."

"Yeah, yeah," the reporter sighed. "I read an old story on it before I came here. Now I'm out of cigarettes." He looked hopefully at Stern.

Stern returned the look coldly. "There's a store where you can buy some about three blocks down the road."

"Is that the room where he's expected to materialize with his machine?" The reporter pointed to an inner door.

"Yes. Dr. Curtis wanted to be sure no one would be injured. This inner circular room was built first; then he had the outer wall put up as an added precaution. The circular passageway we're in leads all around the old room, but this doorway is the only entrance."

"And what are those holes in the top of the door for?"

"If he returns, we can tell by the displaced air rushing out. Then the door will open automatically."

"And when is the return scheduled for?" asked the reporter.

"Three-forty-seven and twenty-nine seconds."

"If it happens," the reporter added skeptically. "And if it doesn't, we have to wait another year."

"Optimum conditions occur just once a year."

"Well, I'm going out to get some cigarettes. I've got time ... and probably nothing to wait for. I'll return though."

He walked briskly through the outer door.

"* * * * *"

"This is the hardest part of the year, especially now. Suppose he did come back," Beryl said plaintively.

"You don't have to worry," Stern assured her. "Clyde himself said that if he didn't come back the second year, he might not make it at all." Stern opened his gold case now and offered Beryl a cigarette.

She shook her head. "But he made two trial runs in it first and came back."

"That was for a short distance only—that is, a short distance astronomically. Figuring for Mars was another story. Maybe he missed the planet and ..."
"Oh, don't! It's just not knowing that I can't stand."

"Well," he said drily, "we'll know in--" he stopped and looked at his wristwatch--"in just about fifteen minutes."

"I can't wait," she moaned.

He put his arm around her. "Relax. Take it easy and stop worrying. It'll just be like last time."

"Not the last time at all. We hadn't--"

"As soon as we are able to leave here," he said, drawing her close and squeezing her gently, "I'll take steps to have him declared legally dead. Then we'll get married."

"That's not much of a proposal," she smiled. "But I guess I'll have to accept you. You have Clyde's power of attorney."

"And we'll be rich. Richer than ever. I'll be able to use some of my own ideas about the investments. As a matter of fact, I have already." And he frowned slightly.

"We have enough," Beryl said quickly. "Don't try to speculate. You know how Clyde felt about that."

"But he spent so damned much on the machine. I had to make back those expenses somehow."

Steps sounded outside and they drew apart. The reporter came in with a companion of about his own age.

"Better wipe the lipstick off," he grinned. "It's almost time for something to happen."

Stern dabbed at his mouth angrily with his handkerchief.

At first the sound was so soft that it could hardly be heard, but soon a whistling grew until it became a threat to the eardrums. The reporters looked at each other with glad, excited eyes.

The whistling stopped abruptly and, slowly, the door opened. The reporters rushed in immediately.

Beryl gripped Stern's hand convulsively. "He's come back."

"Yes, but that mustn't change our plans, Beryl dear."

"But, Al ... Oh, why were we so foolish?"

"Not foolish, dear. Not at all foolish. Now we have to go in."

Inside the room was the large sphere of metalloy. It had lost its original gleam and was stained and battered, standing silent, closed, enigmatic.

"Where's the door?" called the first reporter.

The sphere rested on a number of metal stilts, reaching out from the lower hemisphere, which held it about three feet from the floor, like a great pincushion turned upside down.

Slowly, a round section of the sphere's wall swung outward and steps descended. As they touched the floor, both reporters, caught by the same idea, sprinted for it and fought to see which would climb it first.

"Wait!" shouted Stern.

The reporters stopped their scuffling and followed Stern's gaze.

Something old and leathery and horrible was emerging from the circular doorway. Several tentacles, like so many snakes, slid around the hand rail which ran down the steps. Then, at the top, it paused.

Stern felt an immediate and unreasoning hate for the thing, whatever it was, a hate so strong that he forgot to feel fear. It seemed to him to combine the repulsive qualities of a spider and a toad. The body, fat and repugnant, was covered by a loose skin, dull and leathery, and the fatness seemed to be pulled downward below the lower tentacles like an insect's body, until it was wider at the bottom than at the top.

Like a salt shaker, Stern thought.

It turned its head--it had no neck; the loose skin of the body just turned with it--and looked back inside the sphere. The head resembled a toad's, but a long trident tongue slid in and out quickly, changing the resemblance to that of a malformed snake.

From the interior, Dr. Curtis appeared beside the creature and stood there vaguely for a moment. Stern noticed that his clothes seemed just as new as when he had left, but he had grown a long, untrimmed beard, and his face had a vacant expression, as if he were hypnotized.

The creature looked upward at Curtis, who was head and shoulders taller, and its resemblance changed again in Stern's mind, so that now it looked like a dog, at least in attitude. From its mouth came a low hissing noise.

Curtis looked down at the dog-spider-toad, his eyes slowly beginning to focus. The creature wiggled like a seal with a fish in sight, then slid and bumped down the steps, with Curtis following him.

"Clyde!" cried Beryl and rushed toward Curtis.

The outstretched tentacles of the beast stopped her, but at a touch from Curtis they fell away and Beryl was in his arms.

Stern watched the scene sourly and with rage in his heart. Why hadn't Clyde waited another year? Then nothing could have changed things. Now he would lose not only Beryl, but the management of the money that was left, and the marketing of new patents on the machine. Curtis did not approve of speculation, especially when it lost money.
"You've changed, Clyde," Beryl was saying as she hugged him. "What is the matter--do you need a doctor?"

"No, I don't want a doctor, but I have to get home," said Curtis.

Stern felt anger again beating in his brain like heavy surf on a beach. Curtis was sick. The least he could have done was die. Well, maybe he still would. And if he didn't he could be helped to--Stern saw the beast looking at him intently, malevolently. Its face might have looked almost human, now that it was so close, if it had possessed eyebrows and hair. As it was, its nose rose abruptly and flared into two really enormous nostrils, but its mouth looked small and wrinkled, like that of an old grandmother without any teeth.

They turned to the doorway without noticing the absence of the reporters, who had long since run off to telephone and get photographers.

Curtis walked slowly. He would stop for a moment, look about as if expecting something entirely different, and then he would move forward again.

They all got into the car, Curtis and Beryl on the front seat, with Beryl driving, and Stern and the creature in the rear. As Beryl drove, Stern looked savagely at the back of Curtis's head, but he felt the beast staring at him balefully. Could it be a mind reader? That was ridiculous. How could anything that couldn't speak read a person's mind?

He turned to study it. The Martian, if that was what it was, had only six tentacles, three on each side. The lower ones were heavy and almost as thick as legs. The upper ones were small and were obviously used as hands, while it was possible that the middle ones could be used either way. A series of suction cups or sucking pads were at the end of each tentacle. With equipment like this, it could walk right up the side of a building, except, perhaps, for the higher gravity of Earth.

Stern could smell it now, a dry, desert smell, and that made it more revolting than ever. They were born to hate each other.

* * * * *

When they got home, Beryl was all solicitousness. The way a woman is when she has a man to impress, Stern thought.

"Just sit right here in your old chair," she told Curtis, "and I'll call a doctor. Then I'll put some water on to heat." But first she knelt by his side and laid her head on his breast. "Oh, darling," she said with a sob, "Why did you wait so long? I've missed you so."

A very good act, Stern told himself bitterly, without believing it at all.

She got up and turned toward Stern. "Will you help me get some water on, Al?" she asked. "I'm going to phone."

He went into the kitchen. He knew where the kettle was, the refrigerator, the mixings. He could hear her dialing, and then, before he got the kettle on the burner, she came inside and closed the kitchen door.

"Clyde's sick and I have to take care of him," she said anxiously.

It wasn't entirely the money, he confessed to himself now. He hated the situation, but he had to give in--on the surface anyway.

"Okay, let's forget the whole thing," he said.

"Oh, Al dear, I knew you'd understand! I've got to go back now and try the phone again. I got a busy signal."

Stern followed her, still rankling at the way Curtis had forced Beryl to live while he spent so generously on his own expensive interests. Shortly after their marriage, he had built a home for Beryl and himself in an exclusive suburb, on a hilly bit of land with a deep ravine at the back. But it was small and Beryl had not even been allowed maids except when they entertained, which was seldom. Soon he would change all that, Stern told himself. They had not dared to while Clyde was away.

In the modern living room, Curtis sprawled in his easy chair as though he hadn't moved since they had placed him there. But his air of abstraction seemed to have increased. Before him sat the beast, looking, Stern thought, more like a dog than ever. Its head wasn't cocked to one side, but that, less than its alien appearance, was the one thing to spoil the illusion.

Tires screeched in the driveway while Beryl was still at the telephone. Stern went to the front door, closed it and put the chain bolt in place. The back door would still be locked and they would hardly try to force the screen windows.

Heavy steps pounded up the front walk. "Did Dr. Curtis really get back?" The first man shot out. The one who followed had a camera.

"Dr. Curtis has returned," Stern spoke through the opening of the front door which the chain permitted, "but his physical condition won't permit questioning, at least until his doctor has seen him."

"Did he really bring back a Martian? We want to see the Martian anyway."

"We can't have Dr. Curtis disturbed in any way until after his physician has examined him," Stern said bluntly.

"Is he in there?"
"We'll give you a report when we're ready."

A second car pulled up to the house as Stern shut the front door, and went to check the rear one. When he came back, flashes from the window showed the cameraman was trying to take pictures through the glass. Stern drew the shades.

"Well, poor Schaughtowl, so you had to come with me," Curtis was saying to the monster.

The beast wiggled again as it had on the steps of the machine. A tail to wag wasn't really necessary, Stern decided, when there was so much body to wiggle.

Schaughtowl, as Curtis addressed it, seemed to brighten in the darkened room.

"Poor, dear Schaughtowl," said Curtis gently.

It was unmistakable now—the skin actually brightened and emitted a sort of eerie, luminous glow.

Curtis leaned over and put his hand on what would have been Schaughtowl's neck. The loose skin writhed joyously, and, snakelike, the whole body responded in rippling waves of emotion.

"Gull Lup," the monster—said wasn't the right word, but it was not a bark, growl, mew, cheep, squawk or snarl. Gulp was as close as Stern could come, a dry and almost painful gulping noise that expressed devotion in some totally foreign way that Stern found revolting.

He realized that the phone had been ringing for some time. He disconnected it, and then heard loud knocking.

"It's Dr. Anderson," he heard a man's voice calling impatiently and angrily.

Cautiously, Stern opened the door, but his care was needless. With a few testy remarks, the doctor quickly cleared a space about the door and entered.

He went at once to Curtis, with only a single shocked glance at Schaughtowl.

"Where the devil have you been and where in hell did you get that thing?" he asked as he unbuttoned Curtis's coat and shirt.

Since playing with his pet, Curtis seemed more awake. "I went to Mars," he said. "They're incredibly advanced in ways we hardly guess. We're entirely off the track. I just came back to explain how."

"Your friend doesn't look very intelligent," the doctor answered, busy with his stethoscope.

"Animals like Schaughtowl are used for steeds or pets," said Curtis. "The Ladonai are pretty much like mankind, only smaller."

"Why did you stay so long?"

"After I left, the Ladonai told me, they were going to shut off any possible communication with Earth until we advance more. They think we're at a very dangerous animal-like stage of development. Once I came home, I knew I couldn't go back, so I wanted to learn as much as I could before I left them."

"Stand up for a minute," ordered the doctor.

"Not right now," said Curtis. "I'm too tired."

"You'd better get to bed, then."

"I think not. It's merely caused by the difference in gravity and heavier air. The Ladonai told me to expect it, but not to lie down. After a while I'll try to take a short walk."

So Clyde wasn't going to die, after all, Stern thought. He had come home with a message, and, remembering the determination of the man, Stern knew he wouldn't die until he had given it. But he had to die. He would die, and who was competent enough to know that it wasn't from the shock of having come home to denser air and a heavier gravity?

There were ways—an oxygen tube, for example. Pure oxygen to be inhaled in his sleep by lungs accustomed to a rarified atmosphere, or stimulants in his food so it would look like a little too much exertion on a heart already overtaxed. There were ways.

Stern's scalp tingled unpleasantly, and he saw the Martian looking at him intently, coldly. In that moment Stern knew without question that his mind was being read. Not his idea, perhaps, but his intent toward Curtis. The Martian would have to be attended to first.

"Is it true, Dr. Anderson? Will he be all right?" Beryl was sitting on the arm of the chair next to Schaughtowl, and she was looking at Clyde almost as adoringly as the Martian. A few hours had undone all that Stern had managed to do in four years.

If Stern had been uncertain, that alone would have decided him.

"I think so," said the doctor. "He seems to be uncomfortable, rather than in pain. I'll send you a prescription for his heart, if he breathes too heavily. Be sure, though, not to give him more than one pill in three hours."

"Of course." Beryl was never that solicitous toward Stern.

"And you'll be in quarantine here until the government decides what, if any, diseases he and the Martian may..."
have brought back with them."
"None at all, Doctor." Curtis's voice was markedly more slurred, and he stared intently with unblinking eyes at the blank wall.
"Well, that's something we can't tell yet. Well have to keep out the press and television men, anyway, because of your health. If I'm not detained, I'll be back tomorrow morning. Call me if there's any change."
On his way out, the physician was besieged by reporters and photographers, baulked of better subjects. Shortly after the doctor's departure, police sirens came screaming up. The men waiting around the house were moved outside the gate and a guard was set at every entrance.

Later, a messenger came, was interrogated by the police sergeant who took a small package from him and brought it to the house.
"Medicine," the sergeant said, handing it gingerly to Stern. "You can't leave here without permission." And he walked hurriedly away.
This might be the answer. Stern had a good idea of what the doctor had prescribed--something he'd said, for the heart. It must have been pretty powerful, too, for the doctor to warn against an overdose. Two at once might do it, or another two a little later.
But there was Schaughtowl.
"Al," said Beryl, "stay with Clyde while I fix something for him to eat."
She was more beautiful than ever. Emotions, he thought wryly, become a woman; they thrive on them. In a few minutes a woman could change like this. It was enough to make a man lose faith in the sex.
"Certainly," he said easily.
Curtis seemed to sleep with wide open eyes gazing blankly at the far wall. Schaughtowl sat motionless before him, watchful as a dog, yet still like a snake or spider patiently waiting. Didn't the beast ever sleep?
A drink was what Stern needed. He went to the closet and poured a double brandy. He sipped it slowly. As delicious fire ran down his gullet and warmed his stomach, he felt his tension ease and a sense of confidence pervade his mind.
He needn't worry. He was always successful, except that once with the stocks. And he had calm nerves.
There were guards out in front now in khaki uniform; the Governor must have called out a company of the National Guard. Stern noticed some state police, too. The house was well guarded on the three sides surrounded by a neat, white picket fence. In the back, the severe drop into the ravine made guards there unnecessary.
It was dark before Dr. Curtis moved. Beryl was watching him; she had little to say to Stern now.
"How about some broth, dear?" she asked Curtis immediately.
Slowly, Clyde's eyes focused on her. He smiled. "Let's try it."
He let Beryl feed him, sitting on a stool beside his chair and being unnecessarily motherly and coddling about it.
For a while after he had eaten, Clyde sat in his chair, looking at Beryl with his new and oddly gentle smile. It seemed to activate some hidden response in her, for she glowed with tenderness.
"I suppose," Curtis slurred, "I ought to try to walk now."
"Let me help." Stern rose and crossed the room.
The Martian rustled like snakes in the weeds, and hissed.
Beryl said without suspicion, "Thank you, Al. I knew you'd do whatever you could for Clyde." And she rested her hand trustingly on his arm.
What was past was past, not to be wept over, not to be regretted.
"Like to walk out in the back for the air?" Stern asked. "The breeze is coming from that direction."
"That will do very well," said Curtis, obviously not caring a bit.
Stern helped Curtis from his chair and supported him under the arm. They went out the back door, the Martian slithering after them. It was cooler in the garden. Stern felt a renewed surge of self-confidence.
"The stars--" Curtis stopped to look upward.
The night was almost cloudless and there was no moon. The house hid any view of the crowds and the guards holding them back. They were alone in the dark.
Curtis started forward again, with the Martian scraping along behind. It would never let Curtis out of its sight as long as it lived; that much was clear to Stern.
He guided Curtis to a seat close to the ravine, a favorite spot. Always the Martian was a step--or a slither--behind, and when Curtis sat down, Schaughtowl sat between his beloved master and the precipitous drop.
Stern picked up a rock from the rock garden and tossed it into the ravine. The Martian did not take his eyes off
Curtis. Stern picked up a larger rock, a sharp, pointed one. He was behind the Martian and Curtis was looking away unseeingly into the night.

It was simple, really, and well executed. The beast's skull bashed in easily, being merely thin bones for a thin atmosphere and light gravitation. A push sent it over the edge of the ravine.

Curtis sat unnoticing, and the traffic jam out front created more than enough confusion to drown out any noise from the creature's fall.

Stern's palm stung. He realized that, before the Martian had pitched over the ravine, a suction pad had for a moment caught at his hand. It had done the beast no good, though.

Curiously, the Martian had not guarded itself, only Curtis. Sitting with its back to Stern had really invited attack. The mind-reading ability was just something that Stern had nervously imagined.

The police would not be able to tell his rock from any other. The heavy body, its ungainly movement and thin bones would explain everything. Besides, there was no motive for killing the Martian and what penalty could there be? It couldn't be called murder.

Curtis was easy to arouse and didn't seem to miss Schaughtowl. Stern maneuvered him to the living room, where he sank into a chair and fell into his mood of abstraction.

Beryl must be in the kitchen cleaning up, Stern supposed. Perhaps he had better put some kind of germicide on his palm, just to ward off infection.

He looked at Curtis relaxed in the chair. Clyde suddenly appeared oddly boyish to him, hardly different than he had been in college days. For a moment Stern felt again the adolescent admiration and fellowship he had felt so strongly then. Don't be stupid, he told himself angrily. This man had the money and the woman that had almost belonged to him.

Moving slowly, Stern deliciously savored the aroma of his triumph. On the table was the bottle. Clyde would be easy, unsuspecting, kindly.

It wouldn't be safe to marry Beryl right away, but there could never be any suspicion.

No need to hurry. For a moment he wanted to watch Curtis. He wondered what kind of pictures Clyde was seeing on the blank wall. Martian landscapes? The strange Ladonai? Too bad he hadn't stayed on Mars. Stern couldn't help having a friendly feeling for his old college chum, pity, too, for what must happen to him soon.

This was no way to kill anyone!

He was growing old and soft!

Nevertheless, Curtis did have a noble and striking face. Funny he had never noticed it before. It seemed to glow with an uncanny peace.

Unnoticed, the numbness crept from Stern's palm along his right arm, and a prickly sensation appeared in his right leg.

It was funny to read a person's thoughts like this. Love flowed from Curtis like the warm glow from a burning candle. A sort of halo had formed from the light above his head.

Symbolic.

From Curtis came wave after wave of love. He could feel it pulsating toward him, and he felt his own heart turn over, answer it. Yes, Curtis was noble.

Stern sank cross-legged on the floor beside Curtis and gazed at him. The prickly sensation had ascended from his leg up through his chest and to his neck. But it didn't matter. Now, for a last time, he could feel the spell of that perfect friendship--before the end.

What end? Why should there be any end to this eternal moment?

Curtis noticed him now. Those half-closed eyes were strangely penetrating. They looked him through.

"Well, Al," he said, "so you killed Schaughtowl?"

Stern looked at the kindly, godlike face and loved it.

Killed whom?

"Poor Al," Curtis said. He leaned over and laid his hand on the back of Stern's neck, fondling it much as one would a dog. "Poor old Al."

Stern's heart leaped in joy. This was ecstasy. It must be expressed. It demanded expression. If he had possessed
a tail, he would have wagged it. Perhaps there was a word for that bliss. There was, and with immense satisfaction he spoke it.
   "Gull Lup," he said.
The foundling could not have been more than three years old. Yet he held a secret that was destined to bring joy to many unhappy people.

Unlike Gaul, the north continent of Venus is divided into four parts. No Caesar has set foot here either, nor shall one—for the dank, stinging, caustic air swallows up the lives of men and only Venus may say, I conquered.

This is colonized Venus, where one may walk without the threat of sudden death—except from other men—the most bitterly fought for, the dearest, bloodiest, most worthless land in the solar system.

Separated by men into East and West at the center of the Twilight Zone, the division across the continent is the irregular, jagged line of Mud River, springing from the Great Serpent Range.

The African Republic holds one quarter which the Negroes exploit as best they can, encumbered by filter masks and protective clothing.

The Asians still actually try to colonize their quarter, while the Venusian primitives neither help nor hinder the bitter game of power-politics, secret murder, and misery—most of all, misery.

The men from Mars understand this better, for their quarter is a penal colony. Sleepy-eyed, phlegmatic Martians, self-condemned for minute violations of their incredible and complex mores—without guards save themselves—will return to the subterranean cities, complex philosophies, and cool, dry air of Mars when they have declared their own sentences to be at an end.

Meanwhile, they labor to extract the wealth of Venus without the bitterness and hate, without the savagery and fear of their neighbors. Hence, they are regarded by all with the greatest suspicion.

The Federated States, after their fashion, plunder the land and send screaming ships to North America laden with booty and with men grown suddenly rich—and with men who will never care for riches or anything else again. These are the fortunate dead. The rest are received into the sloppy breast of Venus where even a tombstone or marker is swallowed in a few, short weeks. And they die quickly on Venus, and often.

From the arbitrary point where the four territories met, New Reno flung its sprawling, dirty carcass over the muddy soil and roared and hooted endlessly, laughed with the rough boisterousness of miners and spacemen, rang with the brittle, brassy laughter of women following a trade older than New Reno. It clanged and shouted and bellowed so loudly that quiet sobbing was never heard.

But a strange sound hung in the air, the crying of a child. A tiny child, a boy, he sat begrimed by mud at the edge of the street where an occasional ground car flung fresh contamination on his small form until he became almost indistinguishable from the muddy street. His whimpering changed to prolonged wailing sobs. He didn't turn to look at any of the giant passers-by nor did they even notice him.

But finally one passer-by stopped. She was young and probably from the Federated States. She was not painted nor was she well-dressed. She had nothing to distinguish her, except that she stopped.

"Oh, my!" she breathed, bending over the tiny form. "You poor thing. Where's your mama?"

The little figure rubbed its face, looked at her blankly and heaved a long, shuddering sigh.

"I can't leave you sitting here in the mud!" She pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe away some of the mud and then helped him up. His clothes were rags, his feet bare. She took him by the hand and as they walked along she talked to him. But he seemed not to hear.

Soon they reached the dirty, plastic front of the Elite Cafe. Once through the double portals, she pulled the respirator from her face. The air inside was dirty and smelly but it was breathable. People were eating noisily, boisterously, with all the lusty, unclean young life that was Venus. They clamored, banged and threw things for no reason other than to throw them.

She guided the little one past the tables filled with people and into the kitchen. The door closed with a bang, shutting out much of the noise from the big room. Gingerly she sat him down on a stool, and with detergent and water she began removing the mud. His eyes were horribly red-rimmed.

"It's a wonder you didn't die out there," she murmured. "Poor little thing!"
"Hey! Are you going to work or aren't you, Jane?" a voice boomed.
A large ruddy man in white had entered the kitchen and he stood frowning at the girl. Women weren't rare on Venus, and she was only a waitress ...

"What in the blue blazes is that!" He pointed to the child.
"He was outside," the girl explained, "sitting in the street. He didn't have a respirator."
The ruddy man scowled at the boy speculatively. "His lungs all right?"
"He isn't coughing much," she replied.
"But what are you going to do with him?" the man asked Jane.
"I don't know," she said. "Something. Tell the Patrol about him, I guess."
The beefy man hesitated. "It's been a long time since I've seen a kid this young on Venus. They always ship 'em home. Could have been dumped. Maybe his parents left him on purpose."

The girl flinched.

He grunted disgustedly, his face mirroring his thoughts. Stringy hair ... plain face ... and soft as Venus slime clear through! He shrugged. "Anyway, he's got to eat." He looked at the small figure. "Want to eat, kid? Would you like a glass of milk?" He opened a refrigerator, took out a plastic bottle and poured milk in a glass.

Chubby hands reached out for the glass.
"There, that's better," the cook said. "Pete will see that you get fed all right." He turned to the girl. "Could he belong to someone around here?"

Jane shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen him before."
"Well, he can stay in the kitchen while you work the shift. I'll watch him."
She nodded, took an apron down from a hook and tied it around her waist. Then she patted the sober-faced youngster on his tousled head and left.

The beefy man studied the boy. "I think I'll put you over there," he said. He lifted him, stool and all, and carried him across the kitchen. "You can watch through that panel. See? That's Jane in there. She'll come back and forth, pass right by here. Is that all right?"

The little one nodded.

"Oh?" Pete raised his eyebrows. "So you do know what I'm saying." He watched the child for a few minutes, then turned his attention to the range. The rush hour was on and he soon forgot the little boy on the stool ...

Whenever possible during the lunch-hour rush, Jane stopped to smile and talk to the child. Once she asked, "Don't you know where your mama and daddy are?"
He just stared at her, unblinking, his big eyes soft and sad-looking.

The girl studied him for a moment, then she picked up a cookie and gave it to him. "Can you tell me your name?" she asked hopefully.

His lips parted. Cookie crumbs fell off his chin and from the corners of his mouth, but he spoke no words.

She sighed, turned, and went out to the clattering throng with laden plates of food.

For a while Jane was so busy she almost forgot the young one. But finally people began to linger more over their food, the clinking of dishes grew quieter and Pete took time for a cup of coffee. His sweating face was haggard. He stared sullenly at the little boy and shook his head.

"Shouldn't be such things as kids," he muttered. "Nothing but a pain in the neck!"

Jane came through the door. "It gets worse all the time," she groaned. She turned to the little boy. "Did you have something to eat?"

"I didn't know what to fix for him," Pete said. "How about some beef stew? Do you think he'd go for that?"

Jane hesitated. "I--I don't know. Try it."

Pete ladled up a bowl of steaming stew. Jane took it and put it on the table. She took a bit on a spoon, blew on it, then held it out. The child opened his mouth. She smiled and slowly fed him the stew.

"How old do you think he is?" Pete asked.

The girl hesitated, opened her mouth, but said nothing.

"About two and a half, I'd guess," Pete answered himself. "Maybe three." Jane nodded and he turned back to cleaning the stove.

"Don't you want some more stew?" Jane asked as she offered the small one another spoonful.

The little mouth didn't open.

"Guess you've had enough," she said, smiling.

Pete glanced up. "Why don't you leave now, Jane. You're going to have to see the Patrol about that kid. I can take care of things here."

She stood thinking for a moment. "Can I use an extra respirator?"

"You can't take him out without one!" Pete replied. He opened a locker and pulled out a transparent facepiece.
"I think this'll tighten down enough to fit his face."

She took it and walked over to the youngster. His large eyes had followed all her movements and he drew back slightly as she held out the respirator. "It won't hurt," she coaxed. "You have to wear it. The air outside stings."

The little face remained steady but the eyes were fearful as Jane slid the transparent mask over his head and tightened the elastic. It pulsed slightly with his breathing.

"Better wrap him in this," Pete suggested, pulling a duroplast jacket out of the locker. "Air's tough on skin."

The girl nodded, pulling on her own respirator. She stepped quickly into her duroplast suit and tied it. "Thanks a lot, Pete," she said, her voice slightly muffled. "See you tomorrow."

Pete grunted as he watched her wrap the tiny form in the jacket, lift it gently in her arms, then push through the door.

The girl walked swiftly up the street. It was quieter now, but in a short time the noise and stench and garishness of New Reno would begin rising to another cacophonous climax.

The strange pair reached a wretched metal structure with an askew sign reading, "El Grande Hotel." Jane hurried through the double portals, the swish of air flapping her outer garments as the air conditioning unit fought savagely to keep out the rival atmosphere of the planet.

There was no one at the desk and no one in the lobby. It was a forlorn place, musty and damp. Venus humidity seemed to eat through everything, even metal, leaving it limp, faded, and stinking.

She hesitated, looked at the visiphone, then impulsively pulled a chair out of the line of sight of the viewing plate and gently set the little boy on it. She pulled the respirator from her face, pressed the button under the blank visiphone disk. The plate lit up and hummed faintly.

"Patrol Office," Jane said.

There was a click and a middle-aged, square-faced man with blue-coated shoulders appeared. "Patrol Office," he repeated.

"This is Jane Grant. I work at the Elite Cafe. Has anyone lost a little boy?"

The patrolman's eyebrows raised slightly. "Little boy? Did you find one?"

"Well--I--I saw one earlier this evening," she faltered. "He was sitting at the edge of the street and I took him into the cafe and fed him."

"Well, there aren't many children in town," he replied. "Let's see." He glanced at a record sheet. "No, none's reported missing. He with you now?"

"Ah--no."

He shook his head again, still looking downward. He said slowly, "His parents must have found him. If he was wandering we'd have picked him up. There is a family that live around there who have a ten-year-old kid who wanders off once in a while. Blond, stutters a little. Was it him?"

"Well, I--" she began. She paused, said firmly, "No."

"Well, we don't have any reports on lost children. Haven't had for some time. If the boy was lost his parents must have found him. Thank you for calling." He broke the connection.

Jane stood staring at the blank plate. No one had reported a little boy missing. In all the maddening confusion that was New Reno, no one had missed a little boy.

Jane stood staring at the blank plate. No one had reported a little boy missing. In all the maddening confusion that was New Reno, no one had missed a little boy.

She looked at the small bundle, walked over and slipped off his respirator. "I should have told the truth," she murmured to him softly. "But you're so tiny and helpless. Poor little thing!"

He looked up at her, then around the lobby, his brown eyes resting on first one object, then another. His little chin began to quiver.

The girl picked him up and stroked his hair. "Don't cry," she soothed. "Everything's going to be all right."

She walked down a hall, rumbling inside her coveralls for a key. At the end of the hall she stopped, unlocked a door, and carried him inside. As an afterthought she locked the door, still holding the small bundle in her arms. Then she placed him on a bed, removed the jacket and threw it on a chair.

"I don't know why I should go to all this trouble," she said, removing her protective coveralls. "I'll probably get picked up by the Patrol. But somebody's got to look after you."

She sat down beside him. "Aren't you even a bit sleepy?"

He smiled a little.

"Maybe now you can tell me your name," she said. "Don't you know your name?"

His expression didn't change.

She pointed to herself. "Jane." Then she hesitated, looked downward for a moment. "Jana, I was called before I came here."

The little face looked up at her. The small mouth opened. "Jana." It was half whisper, half whistle.

"That's right," she replied, stroking his hair. "My, but your throat must be sore. I hope you won't be sick from
breathing too much of that awful air."

She regarded him quizzically. "You know, I've never seen many little boys. I don't quite know how to treat one. But I know you should get some sleep."

She smiled and reached over to take off the rags. He pulled away suddenly.

"Don't be afraid," she said reassuringly. "I wouldn't hurt you."

He clutched the little ragged shirt tightly.

"Don't be afraid," she repeated soothingly. "I'll tell you what. You lie down and I'll put this blanket over you," she said, rising. "Will that be all right?"

She laid him down and covered the small form with a blanket. He lay there watching her with his large eyes.

"You don't look very sleepy," she said. "Perhaps I had better turn the light down." She did so, slowly, so as not to alarm him. But he was silent, watchful, never taking his eyes from her.

She smiled and sat down next to him. "Now I'll tell you a story and then you must go to sleep," she said softly.

He smiled--just a little smile--and she was pleased.

"Fine," she cried. "Well--once upon a time there was a beautiful planet, not at all like this one. There were lovely flowers and cool-running streams and it only rained once in a while. You'd like it there for it's a very nice place. But there were people there who liked to travel--to see strange places and new things, and one day they left in a great big ship."

She paused again, frowning in thought. "Well, they traveled a long, long way and saw many things. Then one day something went wrong."

She paused, straightening slightly.

"Something went very, very wrong and they tried to land so they could fix it. But when they tried to land they found they couldn't--and they fell and just barely managed to save themselves. The big, beautiful ship was all broken. Well, since they couldn't fix the ship at all now, they set out on foot to find out where they were and to see if they could get help. Then they found that they were in a land of great big giants, and the people were very fierce."

The little boy's dark eyes were watching her intently but she went on, hardly noticing.

"So they went back to the broken ship and tried to decide what to do. They couldn't get in touch with their home because the radio part of the ship was all broken up. And the giants were horrible and wanted everything for themselves and were cruel and mean and probably would have hurt the poor ship-wrecked people if they had known they were there."

"So--do you know what they did? They got some things from the ship and they went and built a giant. And they put little motors inside and things to make it run and talk so that the giants wouldn't be able to tell that it wasn't another giant just like themselves."

She paused, straightening slightly.

"And then they made a space inside the giant where somebody could sit and run this big giant and talk and move around--and the giants wouldn't ever know that she was there. They made it a she. In fact, she was the only person who could do it because she could learn to talk all sorts of languages--that's what she could do best. So she went out in the giant suit and mingled with the giants and worked just like they did."

"But every once in a while she'd go back to the others, bringing them things they needed. And she would bring back news. That was their only hope--news of a ship which might be looking for them, which might take them home--"

She broke off. "I wonder what the end of the story will be?" she murmured.

For some time she had not been using English. She had been speaking in a soft, fluid language unlike anything ever heard on Venus. But now she had stopped speaking entirely.

After a slight pause--another voice spoke--in the same melodious, alien tongue! It said, "I think I know the end of the story. I think someone has come for you poor people and is going to take you home."

She gasped--for she realized it had not been her voice. Her artificial eyes watched, stunned, as the little boy began peeling off a skin-tight, flexible baby-faced mask, revealing underneath the face of a little man.
It is man's most precious possession--no living thing can exist without it. But when they gave it to Orville, it killed him. For the answer, read 1/M.

"Now watch," Remm said, indicating the native. Macker had been absent, exploring the countryside in the immediate vicinity of their landing place, and had not witnessed the capture of the native, or the tests his two companions made on it.

Macker followed Remm's gaze to where the biped native sat hunched. The creature was bent into an ungainly position, its body crooked at incongruous angles, in such a way as to allow most of its weight to rest on a packing-box at the base of a middle angle. Its stubby feet, on the ends of thin, pipelike legs, rested against the floor of the space ship. Its body was covered, almost entirely, with an artificial skin material of various colors. Some of the colors hurt Macker's eyes. In the few places where the flesh showed through the skin was an unhealthy, pallid white.

Slowly the creature's head swiveled on its short neck until it faced them.

"Those orifices in the upper portion of its skull are evidently organs of sight," Remm said. "It sees that we are quite a distance away. It will probably attempt to escape again."

Slowly--slowly--the native's head rotated away from them in a half-circle until it faced Toolls, working over his instruments on the far side of the room. Then it turned its head back until it faced the door of the ship.

"It is setting itself for flight now," Remm said. "Notice the evidence of strain on its face."

The creature leaned forward and the appendages on the ends of its upper limbs clutched the sides of the box as it propelled its body forward.

It raised its right foot in a slow arc, employing a double-jointed, breaking action of its leg. For a long moment it rested its entire weight on its lumpy right foot, while its momentum carried its body sluggishly forward. Then it repeated the motion with its left leg; then again its right. All the while evidencing great exertion and concentration of effort.

"It is making what it considers a mad dash for freedom," Remm said. "Probably at the ultimate speed of which it is capable. That would be ridiculous except that it's normal for its own environment. This is definitely a slow-motion world."

The creature was a third-way to the door now. Once again its head turned in its slow quarter-circle, to look at them. As it saw that Remm and Macker had not moved it altered the expression on its face.

"It seems to express its emotions through facial contortions," Remm said. "Though I suspect that the sounds it makes with the upper part of its trachea during moments of agitation are also outlets of emotional stress, rather than efforts at communication." He called across the room to Toolls. "What did you find out about its speech?"

"Extremely primitive," Toolls replied. "Incredible as it may appear to us it uses combinations of sounds to form word-symbols. Each word indicates some action, or object; or denotes degree, time, or shades of meaning. Other words are merely connectives. It seems to make little use of inflections, the basis of a rational language. Thoughts which we can project with a few sounds would take it dozens of words to express."

"Just how intelligent is it?" Macker asked.

"Only as intelligent as a high degree of self-preservation instinct would make it."

"Are you certain that it is a member of the dominant species of life on the planet?"

"There's no doubt about it," Toolls replied. "I've made very careful observations."

"This attempt at escape is a pretty good example of its intelligence," Remm said. "This is the sixth time it has tried to escape--in exactly the same way. As soon as it sees that we are farther away from it than it is from the door, it makes its dash."

* * * * *

The creature was one step away from the space ship's open portal now and bringing its foot up to cross the threshold. Remm walked over and lifted it off the floor.

"Its legs are still moving in a running motion," Macker said. " Doesn't it realize yet that you've picked it up?"

"Its nervous system and reflexes are evidently as slow as its motor muscles," Remm replied. "There has not been time for the sensation of my picking it up to reach the brain, and for the brain to send back its message to the legs to stop their running motion."

"How heavy is it?" Macker asked.

"Only a few ounces," Remm replied. "But that's logical considering that this is a 'light' planet. If we took it back to our own 'heavy' world, gravity would crush it to a light film of the liquid which comprises the greater part of its substance."

Remm set the creature down on the box in its former queerly contorted position. Toolls had left his instruments and strolled over beside them to observe the native.

"One of its appendages seems bent at a peculiar angle," Macker said.
"I noticed that," Remm answered. "I think that I may have broken the bone in several places when I first captured it. I was not aware then of how fragile it was. But now that you mention it, I should be able to use that injury to give you a good illustration of the interplay of emotional expressions on its face. Observe now as I touch it."

Remm reached over and touched—very lightly—the broken portion of the native's appendage. The muscles of the creature's face pulled its flaccid flesh into distorted positions, bunching some and stretching others. "It is very probably registering pain," Remm said.

Suddenly the starch seemed to leave the native's body and it slowly slumped across the packing-box.

"Why is it doing that, Tool?" Remm asked.

Toolls concentrated for a minute, absorbing the feelings and thought pulsations emanating from the creature. "The conscious plane of its mind has blanked out," he said. "I presume the pain you caused by touching its wounded member resulted in a breakdown of its nervous system. The only thought waves I receive now are disjointed impressions and pictures following no rational series. However, I'm certain that it will be only temporary."

"Don't you think that in justice to the creature we should repair its wound before we free it?" Macker asked.

"I had intended to have it done," Remm replied. "You shouldn't have any trouble fixing it, should you, Tool?"

"No," Toolls answered. "I may as well attend to it right now." He rolled the portable converter over beside the creature and carefully laid its arm in the "pan." The converter automatically set its gauges and instruments of calculation, and gave its click of "ready."

Toolls fed a short length of basic into the machine and it began its work. The native was still unconscious. The bone of the wounded arm slowly evaporated, beginning with the wrist joint. The evaporated portion was instantly replaced by the manufactured bone of the converter. At the same time it repaired all ruptured blood vessels and damaged ligaments and muscles.

"It was not possible, of course, for me to replace the bone with another of the same composition as its own," Toolls said, after the machine had completed its work. "But I gave it one of our 'heavy' ones. There will be no force on this planet powerful enough to break it again."

The native's first evidence of a return to consciousness was a faint fluttering of the lids that covered its organs of vision. The lids opened and it looked up at them.

"Its eyesight is as slow as its muscular reactions," Remm said. "Watch." Remm raised his hand and waved it slowly in front of the native's face. The eyes of the native, moving in odd, jerking movements, followed the hand's progress. Remm raised the hand—speeding its action slightly—and the eyesight faltered and lost it. The native's eyes rolled wildly until once again they located the hand.

Remm took three steps forward. The native's eyes were unable to follow his change of position. Its gaze wandered about the room, until again its settled on Remm's waiting figure.

"Can you imagine anything being so slow," Remm said, "and still ..." Suddenly Macker interrupted. "Something is wrong. It is trying to get up, but it can't." The native was registering signs of distress, kicking its legs and twisting its body into new positions of contortion.

"I see what the trouble is," Toolls said. "It's unable to lift the appendage with the new bone in. I never thought of that before but its 'light' muscles aren't strong enough to lift the limb. We've got the poor creature pinned to the box by the weight of its own arm."

"We can't do that to it," Remm said. "Isn't there any way you can give it a lighter bone?"

"None that wouldn't take a retooling of the converter," Toolls said. "I'm not certain that I could do it, and even if I could, we don't have the time to spare. I could give it stronger muscles in the arm, but that may throw off the metabolism of the whole body. If it did, the result would be fatal. I'd hate to chance it."

"I have an idea," Macker said. By the inflections of his tones the others knew that some incongruity of the situation had aroused Macker's sense of humor. "Why don't we give the creature an entirely new body? We could replace the flesh and viscera, as well as the cartilaginous structure, with our own type substance. It would probably be an indestructible being as far as its own world is concerned. And it would be as powerful as their mightiest machines. We'd leave behind us a superman that could change the course of this world's history. You could do it, couldn't you, Tool?"

"Quite simply."

"Our policy has always been not to interfere in anyway with the races we study," Remm protested. "But our policy has also been never to harm any of them, if at all possible to avoid it," Macker insisted. "In common justice you have to complete the job Toolls began on the arm, or you're condemning this poor thing to death."

"But do we have the right to loose such an unpredictable factor as it would be among them?" Remm asked.
"After all, our purpose is exploration and observation, not playing the parts of gods to the primitives we encounter."

"True, that is the rule which we have always followed in the past," Macker agreed, "but it is in no way a requirement. We are empowered to use our judgment in all circumstances. And in this particular instance I believe I can convince you that the course I suggest is the more just one." He turned to Toolls. "Just what stage of cultural development would you say this creature's race has attained?"

"It still retains more of an animal-like adaptation to its surroundings than an intellectual one," Toolls replied. "Its civilization is divided into various sized units of cooperation which it calls governments. Each unit vies with the others for a greater share of its world's goods. That same rivalry is carried down to the individual within the unit. Each strives for acquisition against his neighbor.

"Further they retain many of their tribal instincts, such as gregariousness, emotional rather than intellectual propagation, and worship of the mightiest fighter. This last, however, is manifested by reverence for individuals attaining position of authority, or acquiring large amounts of their medium of exchange, rather than by physical superiority."

"That's what I mean," Macker said. "Our policy in the past has been to avoid tampering, only because of the fear of bringing harm. If we created a super being among them, to act as a controlling and harmonizing force, we'd hasten their development by thousands of years. We'd be granting them the greatest possible boon!"

"I don't know," Remm said, obviously swayed by Macker's logic. "I'm still hesitant about introducing a being into their midst whose thought processes would be so subtle and superior to their own. How do you feel about it, Toolls?"

"What would they have to lose?" Toolls asked with his penchant for striking the core of an argument. "The right or wrong of such moral and philosophical considerations has always been a delicate thing to decide," Remm acquiesced reluctantly. "Go ahead if you think it is the right thing to do."

* * * * *

"All finished?" Macker asked.

"That depends on how much you want me to do," Toolls replied. "I've substituted our 'heavy' substances for his entire body structure, including the brain--at the same time transferring his former memory and habit impressions. That was necessary if he is to be able to care for himself. Also I brought his muscular reaction time up to our norm, and speeded his reflexes."

"Have you implanted any techniques which he did not possess before, such as far-seeing, or mental insight?" Macker asked.

"No," Toolls said. "That is what I want your advice about. Just how much should I reveal about ourselves and our background? Or should he be left without any knowledge of us?"

"Well ..." Now that the others had deferred to Macker's arguments, he had lost much of his certainty. "Perhaps we should at least let him know who we are, and what we have done. That would save him much alarm and perplexity when it comes time to reorient himself. Also I brought his muscular reaction time up to our norm, and speeded his reflexes."

"My personal opinion," Remm said, "is that we can't give him much of our science, because it would be like giving a baby a high explosive to play with. His race is much too primitive to handle it wisely. Either he, or someone to whom he imparts what we teach him, would be certain to bring catastrophe to his world. And if we let him learn less, but still remember his contact with us, in time his race would very likely come to regard us as gods. I would hesitate to drag in any metaphysical confusion to add to the uncertainties you are already engendering. My advice would be to wipe his mind of all memory of us. Let him explain his new found invincibility to himself in his own way."

Macker had no criticism to offer to this suggestion. "Does he retain any of his immunity to this world's malignant germs?" he asked.

"They are too impotent to represent any hazard to his present body mechanism," Toolls replied. "If and when he dies, it will not be from disease."

"He will be subject to the deterioration of old age, the same as we are, won't he?" Macker asked.

"Of course," Toolls said, "but that's the only thing that will be able to bring him down. He cannot be harmed by any force this 'light' world can produce; he is impervious to sickness; and he will live indefinitely."

"Indefinitely?"

"As his world reckons time. Their normal life span is less than a hundred years. Ours is over five thousand. He will probably live approximately twice that long, because he will be subjected to less stress and strain, living as he does on a world of lighter elements."

"Then we have truly made a superman," Macker's tones inflected satisfaction. "I wish we were returning this
way in a thousand years or so. I'd like to see the monumental changes he will effect."
"We may at that," Remm said, "or others of our people will. He will probably be a living legend by then. I'd
like to hear what his race has to say about him. Do they have names with which to differentiate individuals?"
"Yes," Toolls said. "This one has a family designation of Pollnow, and a member designation of Orville."
"It will be necessary for us to leave in exactly ten minutes," Remm reminded them. "Our next stopping place--
the red star--will reach its nearest conjunction with this planet by the time we meet it out in space."
"Then we will have time to do nothing more for him before we go," Macker said. "But as far as I can see we've
forgotten nothing, have we, Toolls?"
"Nothing," Toolls answered. "No--we forgot nothing."
* * * * *
But Toolls was wrong. They had forgotten one thing. A minor detail, relatively....
On Toolls' world his race, in the course of its evolution, had adjusted itself to its own particular environment.
Logically, the final result was that they evolved into beings best able to survive in that environment. As such their
food--a "heavy," highly concentrated food--was ideally suited to supply the needs of their "heavy," tremendously
avid organisms.
Orville Pollnow had no such food available. His body--no larger than before--had an Earth mass of one
hundred and eighty thousand pounds. One hundred and eighty thousand pounds--the weight of twelve hundred
average sized men--of fiercely burning, intense virility. Even continuous eating--of his own world's food--could not
supply the demands of that body.
Twenty-four hours after the aliens left, Pollnow was dead--of starvation.
THE END

Contents
THE SKULL
By Philip K. Dick

Conger agreed to kill a stranger he had never seen. But he would make no mistakes because he had the
stranger's skull under his arm.

"What is this opportunity?" Conger asked. "Go on. I'm interested."
The room was silent; all faces were fixed on Conger—still in the drab prison uniform. The Speaker leaned
forward slowly.
"Before you went to prison your trading business was paying well—all illegal—all very profitable. Now you
have nothing, except the prospect of another six years in a cell."
Conger scowled.
"There is a certain situation, very important to this Council, that requires your peculiar abilities. Also, it is a
situation you might find interesting. You were a hunter, were you not? You've done a great deal of trapping, hiding
in the bushes, waiting at night for the game? I imagine hunting must be a source of satisfaction to you, the chase, the
stalking—"
Conger sighed. His lips twisted. "All right," he said. "Leave that out. Get to the point. Who do you want me to
kill?"
The Speaker smiled. "All in proper sequence," he said softly.
The car slid to a stop. It was night; there was no light anywhere along the street. Conger looked out. "Where are
we? What is this place?"
The hand of the guard pressed into his arm. "Come. Through that door."
Conger stepped down, onto the damp sidewalk. The guard came swiftly after him, and then the Speaker.
Conger took a deep breath of the cold air. He studied the dim outline of the building rising up before them.
"I know this place. I've seen it before," he said, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark. Suddenly he
became alert. "This is—"
"Yes. The First Church." The Speaker walked toward the steps. "We're expected."
"Expected? Here?"
"Yes." The Speaker mounted the stairs. "You know we're not allowed in their Churches, especially with guns!"
He stopped. Two armed soldiers loomed up ahead, one on each side.
"All right?" The Speaker looked up at them. They nodded. The door of the Church was open. Conger could see other soldiers inside, standing about, young soldiers with large eyes, gazing at the ikons and holy images.

"I see," he said.

"It was necessary," the Speaker said. "As you know, we have been singularly unfortunate in the past in our relations with the First Church."

"This won't help."

"But it's worth it. You will see."

They passed through the hall and into the main chamber where the altar piece was, and the kneeling places. The Speaker scarcely glanced at the altar as they passed by. He pushed open a small side door and beckoned Conger through.

"In here. We have to hurry. The faithful will be flocking in soon."

Conger entered, blinking. They were in a small chamber, low-ceilinged, with dark panels of old wood. There was a smell of ashes and smoldering spices in the room. He sniffed. "What's that? The smell."

"Cups on the wall. I don't know." The Speaker crossed impatiently to the far side. "According to our information, it is hidden here by this—"

Conger looked around the room. He saw books and papers, holy signs and images. A strange low shiver went through him.

"Does my job involve anyone of the Church? If it does—"

The Speaker turned, astonished. "Can it be that you believe in the Founder? Is it possible, a hunter, a killer—"

"No. Of course not. All their business about resignation to death, non-violence—"

"What is it, then?"

Conger shrugged. "I've been taught not to mix with such as these. They have strange abilities. And you can't reason with them."

The Speaker studied Conger thoughtfully. "You have the wrong idea. It is no one here that we have in mind. We've found that killing them only tends to increase their numbers."

"Then why come here? Let's leave."

"No. We came for something important. Something you will need to identify your man. Without it you won't be able to find him." A trace of a smile crossed the Speaker's face. "We don't want you to kill the wrong person. It's too important."

"I don't make mistakes." Conger's chest rose. "Listen, Speaker—"

"This is an unusual situation," the Speaker said. "You see, the person you are after—the person that we are sending you to find—is known only by certain objects here. They are the only traces, the only means of identification. Without them—"

"What are they?"

He came toward the Speaker. The Speaker moved to one side. "Look," he said. He drew a sliding wall away, showing a dark square hole. "In there."

Conger squatted down, staring in. He frowned. "A skull! A skeleton!"

"The man you are after has been dead for two centuries," the Speaker said. "This is all that remains of him. And this is all you have with which to find him."

For a long time Conger said nothing. He stared down at the bones, dimly visible in the recess of the wall. How could a man dead centuries be killed? How could he be stalked, brought down?

Conger was a hunter, a man who had lived as he pleased, where he pleased. He had kept himself alive by trading, bringing furs and pelts in from the Provinces on his own ship, riding at high speed, slipping through the customs line around Earth.

He had hunted in the great mountains of the moon. He had stalked through empty Martian cities. He had explored—

The Speaker said, "Soldier, take these objects and have them carried to the car. Don't lose any part of them."

The soldier went into the cupboard, reaching gingerly, squatting on his heels.

"It is my hope," the Speaker continued softly, to Conger, "that you will demonstrate your loyalty to us, now. There are always ways for citizens to restore themselves, to show their devotion to their society. For you I think this would be a very good chance. I seriously doubt that a better one will come. And for your efforts there will be quite a restitution, of course."

The two men looked at each other; Conger, thin, unkempt, the Speaker immaculate in his uniform.

"I understand you," Conger said. "I mean, I understand this part, about the chance. But how can a man who has been dead two centuries be—"

"I'll explain later," the Speaker said. "Right now we have to hurry!" The soldier had gone out with the bones,
wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. The Speaker walked to the door. "Come. They've already discovered that we've broken in here, and they'll be coming at any moment."

They hurried down the damp steps to the waiting car. A second later the driver lifted the car up into the air, above the house-tops.

The Speaker settled back in the seat.

"The First Church has an interesting past," he said. "I suppose you are familiar with it, but I'd like to speak of a few points that are of relevancy to us.

"It was in the twentieth century that the Movement began—during one of the periodic wars. The Movement developed rapidly, feeding on the general sense of futility, the realization that each war was breeding greater war, with no end in sight. The Movement posed a simple answer to the problem: Without military preparations—weapons—there could be no war. And without machinery and complex scientific technocracy there could be no weapons.

"The Movement preached that you couldn't stop war by planning for it. They preached that man was losing to his machinery and science, that it was getting away from him, pushing him into greater and greater wars. Down with society, they shouted. Down with factories and science! A few more wars and there wouldn't be much left of the world.

"The Founder was an obscure person from a small town in the American Middle West. We don't even know his name. All we know is that one day he appeared, preaching a doctrine of non-violence, non-resistance; no fighting, no paying taxes for guns, no research except for medicine. Live out your life quietly, tending your garden, staying out of public affairs; mind your own business. Be obscure, unknown, poor. Give away most of your possessions, leave the city. At least that was what developed from what he told the people."

The car dropped down and landed on a roof.

"The Founder preached this doctrine, or the germ of it; there's no telling how much the faithful have added themselves. The local authorities picked him up at once, of course. Apparently they were convinced that he meant it; he was never released. He was put to death, and his body buried secretly. It seemed that the cult was finished."

The Speaker smiled. "Unfortunately, some of his disciples reported seeing him after the date of his death. The rumor spread; he had conquered death, he was divine. It took hold, grew. And here we are today, with a First Church, obstructing all social progress, destroying society, sowing the seeds of anarchy—"

"But the wars," Conger said. "About them?"

"The wars? Well, there were no more wars. It must be acknowledged that the elimination of war was the direct result of non-violence practiced on a general scale. But we can take a more objective view of war today. What was so terrible about it? War had a profound selective value, perfectly in accord with the teachings of Darwin and Mendel and others. Without war the mass of useless, incompetent mankind, without training or intelligence, is permitted to grow and expand unchecked. War acted to reduce their numbers; like storms and earthquakes and droughts, it was nature's way of eliminating the unfit.

"Without war the lower elements of mankind have increased all out of proportion. They threaten the educated few, those with scientific knowledge and training, the ones equipped to direct society. They have no regard for science or a scientific society, based on reason. And this Movement seeks to aid and abet them. Only when scientists are in full control can the—"

He looked at his watch and then kicked the car door open. "I'll tell you the rest as we walk."

They crossed the dark roof. "Doubtless you now know whom those bones belonged to, who it is that we are after. He has been dead just two centuries, now, this ignorant man from the Middle West, this Founder. The tragedy is that the authorities of the time acted too slowly. They allowed him to speak, to get his message across. He was allowed to preach, to start his cult. And once such a thing is under way, there's no stopping it.

"But what if he had died before he preached? What if none of his doctrines had ever been spoken? It took only a moment for him to utter them, that we know. They say he spoke just once, just one time. Then the authorities came, taking him away. He offered no resistance; the incident was small."

The Speaker turned to Conger.

"Small, but we're reaping the consequences of it today."

They went inside the building. Inside, the soldiers had already laid out the skeleton on a table. The soldiers stood around it, their young faces intense.

Conger went over to the table, pushing past them. He bent down, staring at the bones. "So these are his remains," he murmured. "The Founder. The Church has hidden them for two centuries."

"Quite so," the Speaker said. "But now we have them. Come along down the hall."

They went across the room to a door. The Speaker pushed it open. Technicians looked up. Conger saw machinery, whirring and turning; benches and retorts. In the center of the room was a gleaming crystal cage.
The Speaker handed a Slem-gun to Conger. "The important thing to remember is that the skull must be saved and brought back—for comparison and proof. Aim low—at the chest."

Conger weighed the gun in his hands. "It feels good," he said. "I know this gun—that is, I've seen them before, but I never used one."

The Speaker nodded. "You will be instructed on the use of the gun and the operation of the cage. You will be given all data we have on the time and location. The exact spot was a place called Hudson's field. About 1960 in a small community outside Denver, Colorado. And don't forget—the only means of identification you will have will be the skull. There are visible characteristics of the front teeth, especially the left incisor—"

Conger listened absently. He was watching two men in white carefully wrapping the skull in a plastic bag. They tied it and carried it into the crystal cage. "And if I should make a mistake?"

"Pick the wrong man? Then find the right one. Don't come back until you succeed in reaching this Founder. And you can't wait for him to start speaking; that's what we must avoid! You must act in advance. Take chances; shoot as soon as you think you've found him. He'll be someone unusual, probably a stranger in the area. Apparently he wasn't known."

Conger listened dimly.
"Do you think you have it all now?" the Speaker asked.
"Yes. I think so." Conger entered the crystal cage and sat down, placing his hands on the wheel.
"Good luck," the Speaker said.
"We'll be awaiting the outcome. There's some philosophical doubt as to whether one can alter the past. This should answer the question once and for all."

Conger fingered the controls of the cage.
"By the way," the Speaker said. "Don't try to use this cage for purposes not anticipated in your job. We have a constant trace on it. If we want it back, we can get it back. Good luck."

Conger said nothing. The cage was sealed. He raised his finger and touched the wheel control. He turned the wheel carefully.

He was still staring at the plastic bag when the room outside vanished.

For a long time there was nothing at all. Nothing beyond the crystal mesh of the cage. Thoughts rushed through Conger's mind, helter-skelter. How would he know the man? How could he be certain, in advance? What had he looked like? What was his name? How had he acted, before he spoke? Would he be an ordinary person, or some strange outlandish crank?

Conger picked up the Slem-gun and held it against his cheek. The metal of the gun was cool and smooth. He practiced moving the sight. It was a beautiful gun, the kind of gun he could fall in love with. If he had owned such a gun in the Martian desert—on the long nights when he had lain, cramped and numbed with cold, waiting for things that moved through the darkness—

He put the gun down and adjusted the meter readings of the cage. The spiraling mist was beginning to condense and settle. All at once forms wavered and fluttered around him.

Colors, sounds, movements filtered through the crystal wire. He clamped the controls off and stood up.

He was on a ridge overlooking a small town. It was high noon. The air was crisp and bright. A few automobiles moved along a road. Off in the distance were some level fields. Conger went to the door and stepped outside. He sniffed the air. Then he went back into the cage.

He stood before the mirror over the shelf, examining his features. He had trimmed his beard—they had not got him to cut it off—and his hair was neat. He was dressed in the clothing of the middle-twentieth century, the odd collar and coat, the shoes of animal hide. In his pocket was money of the times. That was important. Nothing more was needed.

Nothing, except his ability, his special cunning. But he had never used it in such a way before.

He walked down the road toward the town.

The first things he noticed were the newspapers on the stands. April 5, 1961. He was not too far off. He looked around him. There was a filling station, a garage, some taverns, and a ten-cent store. Down the street was a grocery store and some public buildings.

A few minutes later he mounted the stairs of the little public library and passed through the doors into the warm interior.

The librarian looked up, smiling.
"Good afternoon," she said.

He smiled, not speaking because his words would not be correct; accented and strange, probably. He went over to a table and sat down by a heap of magazines. For a moment he glanced through them. Then he was on his feet again. He crossed the room to a wide rack against the wall. His heart began to beat heavily.
Newspapers—weeks on end. He took a roll of them over to the table and began to scan them quickly. The print was odd, the letters strange. Some of the words were unfamiliar.

He set the papers aside and searched farther. At last he found what he wanted. He carried the Cherrywood Gazette to the table and opened it to the first page. He found what he wanted:

**PRISONER HANGS SELF**

An unidentified man, held by the county sheriff’s office for suspicion of criminal syndicalism, was found dead this morning, by—

He finished the item. It was vague, uninforming. He needed more. He carried the Gazette back to the racks and then, after a moment’s hesitation, approached the librarian.

"More?" he asked. "More papers. Old ones?"

She frowned. "How old? Which papers?"

"Months old. And—before."

"Of the Gazette? This is all we have. What did you want? What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

He was silent.

"You might find older issues at the Gazette office," the woman said, taking off her glasses. "Why don’t you try there? But if you’d tell me, maybe I could help you—"

He went out.

The Gazette office was down a side street; the sidewalk was broken and cracked. He went inside. A heater glowed in the corner of the small office. A heavy-set man stood up and came slowly over to the counter.

"What did you want, mister?" he said.

"Old papers. A month. Or more."

"To buy? You want to buy them?"

"Yes." He held out some of the money he had. The man stared.

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Wait a minute." He went quickly out of the room. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of his armload, his face red. "Here are some," he grunted. "Told what I could find. Covers the whole year. And if you want more—"

Conger carried the papers outside. He sat down by the road and began to go through them.

What he wanted was four months back, in December. It was a tiny item, so small that he almost missed it. His hands trembled as he scanned it, using the small dictionary for some of the archaic terms.

**MAN ARRESTED FOR UNLICENSED DEMONSTRATION**

An unidentified man who refused to give his name was picked up in Cooper Creek by special agents of the sheriff’s office, according to Sheriff Duff. It was said the man was recently noticed in this area and had been watched continually. It was—

Cooper Creek. December, 1960. His heart pounded. That was all he needed to know. He stood up, shaking himself, stamping his feet on the cold ground. The sun had moved across the sky to the very edge of the hills. He smiled. Already he had discovered the exact time and place. Now he needed only to go back, perhaps to November, to Cooper Creek—

He walked back through the main section of town, past the library, past the grocery store. It would not be hard; the hard part was over. He would go there; rent a room, prepare to wait until the man appeared.

He turned the corner. A woman was coming out of a doorway, loaded down with packages. Conger stepped aside to let her pass. The woman glanced at him. Suddenly her face turned white. She stared, her mouth open.

Conger hurried on. He looked back. What was wrong with her? The woman was still staring; she had dropped the packages to the ground. He increased his speed. He turned a second corner and went up a side street. When he looked back again the woman had come to the entrance of the street and was starting after him. A man joined her, and the two of them began to run toward him.

He lost them and left the town, striding quickly, easily, up into the hills at the edge of town. When he reached the cage he stopped. What had happened? Was it something about his clothing? His dress?

He pondered. Then, as the sun set, he stepped into the cage.

Conger sat before the wheel. For a moment he waited, his hands resting lightly on the control. Then he turned the wheel, just a little, following the control readings carefully.

The grayness settled down around him.

But not for very long.

The man looked him over critically. "You better come inside," he said. "Out of the cold."

"Thanks." Conger went gratefully through the open door, into the living-room. It was warm and close from the heat of the little kerosene heater in the corner. A woman, large and shapeless in her flowered dress, came from the kitchen. She and the man studied him critically.
"It's a good room," the woman said. "I'm Mrs. Appleton. It's got heat. You need that this time of year."
"Yes." He nodded, looking around.
"You want to eat with us?"
"What?"
"You want to eat with us?" The man's brows knitted. "You're not a foreigner, are you, mister?"
"No." He smiled. "I was born in this country. Quite far west, though."
"California?"
"No." He hesitated. "In Oregon."
"What's it like up there?" Mrs. Appleton asked. "I hear there's a lot of trees and green. It's so barren here. I come from Chicago, myself."
"That's the Middle West," the man said to her. "You ain't no foreigner."
"Oregon isn't foreign, either," Conger said. "It's part of the United States."
The man nodded absently. He was staring at Conger's clothing.
"That's a funny suit you got on, mister," he said. "Where'd you get that?"
Conger was lost. He shifted uneasily. "It's a good suit," he said. "Maybe I better go some other place, if you don't want me here."

They both raised their hands protestingly. The woman smiled at him. "We just have to look out for those Reds. You know, the government is always warning us about them."
"The Reds?" He was puzzled.
"The government says they're all around. We're supposed to report anything strange or unusual, anybody doesn't act normal."
"Like me?"
They looked embarrassed. "Well, you don't look like a Red to me," the man said. "But we have to be careful. The Tribune says—"

Conger half listened. It was going to be easier than he had thought. Clearly, he would know as soon as the Founder appeared. These people, so suspicious of anything different, would be buzzing and gossiping and spreading the story. All he had to do was lie low and listen, down at the general store, perhaps. Or even here, in Mrs. Appleton's boarding house.

"Can I see the room?" he said.
"Certainly." Mrs. Appleton went to the stairs. "I'll be glad to show it to you."
They went upstairs. It was colder upstairs, but not nearly as cold as outside. Nor as cold as nights on the Martian deserts. For that he was grateful.

He was walking slowly around the store, looking at the cans of vegetables, the frozen packages of fish and meats shining and clean in the open refrigerator counters.

Ed Davies came toward him. "Can I help you?" he said. The man was a little oddly dressed, and with a beard! Ed couldn't help smiling.

"Nothing," the man said in a funny voice. "Just looking."
"Sure," Ed said. He walked back behind the counter. Mrs. Hacket was wheeling her cart up.
"Who's he?" she whispered, her sharp face turned, her nose moving, as if it were sniffing. "I never seen him before."
"I don't know."
"Looks funny to me. Why does he wear a beard? No one else wears a beard. Must be something the matter with him."
"Maybe he likes to wear a beard. I had an uncle who—"
"Wait." Mrs. Hacket stiffened. "Didn't that—what was his name? The Red—that old one. Didn't he have a beard? Marx. He had a beard."
Ed laughed. "This ain't Karl Marx. I saw a photograph of him once."
Mrs. Hacket was staring at him. "You did?"
"Sure." He flushed a little. "What's the matter with that?"
"I'd sure like to know more about him," Mrs. Hacket said. "I think we ought to know more, for our own good."
"Hey, mister! Want a ride?"
Conger turned quickly, dropping his hand to his belt. He relaxed. Two young kids in a car, a girl and a boy. He smiled at them. "A ride? Sure."
Conger got into the car and closed the door. Bill Willet pushed the gas and the car roared down the highway.
"I appreciate a ride," Conger said carefully. "I was taking a walk between towns, but it was farther than I thought."
"Where are you from?" Lora Hunt asked. She was pretty, small and dark, in her yellow sweater and blue skirt.

"From Cooper Creek."

"Cooper Creek?" Bill said. He frowned. "That's funny. I don't remember seeing you before."

"Why, do you come from there?"

"I was born there. I know everybody there."

"I just moved in. From Oregon."

"From Oregon? I didn't know Oregon people had accents."

"Do I have an accent?"

"You use words funny."

"How?"

"I don't know. Doesn't he, Lora?"

"You slur them," Lora said, smiling. "Talk some more. I'm interested in dialects." She glanced at him, white-teethed. Conger felt his heart constrict.

"I have a speech impediment."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

They looked at him curiously as the car purred along. Conger for his part was struggling to find some way of asking them questions without seeming curious. "I guess people from out of town don't come here much," he said. "Strangers."

"No." Bill shook his head. "Not very much."

"I'll bet I'm the first outsider for a long time."

"I guess so."

Conger hesitated. "A friend of mine—someone I know, might be coming through here. Where do you suppose I might—" He stopped. "Would there be anyone certain to see him? Someone I could ask, make sure I don't miss him if he comes?"

They were puzzled. "Just keep your eyes open. Cooper Creek isn't very big."

"No. That's right."

They drove in silence. Conger studied the outline of the girl. Probably she was the boy's mistress. Perhaps she was his trial wife. Or had they developed trial marriage back so far? He could not remember. But surely such an attractive girl would be someone's mistress by this time; she would be sixteen or so, by her looks. He might ask her sometime, if they ever met again.

The next day Conger went walking along the one main street of Cooper Creek. He passed the general store, the two filling stations, and then the post office. At the corner was the soda fountain.

He stopped. Lora was sitting inside, talking to the clerk. She was laughing, rocking back and forth.

Conger pushed the door open. Warm air rushed around him. Lora was drinking hot chocolate, with whipped cream. She looked up in surprise as he slid into the seat beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Am I intruding?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not at all."

The clerk came over. "What do you want?"

Conger looked at the chocolate. "Same as she has."

Lora was watching Conger, her arms folded, elbows on the counter. She smiled at him. "By the way. You don't know my name. Lora Hunt."

She was holding out her hand. He took it awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. "Conger is my name," he murmured.

"Conger? Is that your last or first name?"

"Last or first?" He hesitated. "Last. Omar Conger."

"Omar?" She laughed. "That's like the poet, Omar Khayyam."

"I don't know of him. I know very little of poets. We restored very few works of art. Usually only the Church has been interested enough—" He broke off. She was staring. He flushed. "Where I come from," he finished.

"The Church? Which church do you mean?"

"The Church." He was confused. The chocolate came and he began to sip it gratefully. Lora was still watching him.

"You're an unusual person," she said. "Bill didn't like you, but he never likes anything different. He's so—so prosaic. Don't you think that when a person gets older he should become—broadened in his outlook?"

Conger nodded.

"He says foreign people ought to stay where they belong, not come here. But you're not so foreign. He means orientals; you know."
Conger nodded.
The screen door opened behind them. Bill came into the room. He stared at them. "Well," he said.
Conger turned. "Hello."
"Well." Bill sat down. "Hello, Lora." He was looking at Conger. "I didn't expect to see you here."
Conger tensed. He could feel the hostility of the boy. "Something wrong with that?"
"No. Nothing wrong with it."
There was silence. Suddenly Bill turned to Lora. "Come on. Let's go."
"Go?" She was astonished. "Why?"
"Just go!" He grabbed her hand. "Come on! The car's outside."
"Why, Bill Willet," Lora said. "You're jealous!"
"Who is this guy?" Bill said. "Do you know anything about him? Look at him, his beard—"
She flared. "So what? Just because he doesn't drive a Packard and go to Cooper High!"
Conger sized the boy up. He was big—big and strong. Probably he was part of some civil control organization.
"Sorry," Conger said. "I'll go."
"What's your business in town?" Bill asked. "What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around Lora?"
Conger looked at the girl. He shrugged. "No reason. I'll see you later."
He turned away. And froze. Bill had moved. Conger's fingers went to his belt. Half pressure, he whispered to himself. No more. Half pressure.
He squeezed. The room leaped around him. He himself was protected by the lining of his clothing, the plastic sheathing inside.
"My God—" Lora put her hands up. Conger cursed. He hadn't meant any of it for her. But it would wear off. There was only a half-amp to it. It would tingle.
Tingle, and paralyze.
He walked out the door without looking back. He was almost to the corner when Bill came slowly out, holding onto the wall like a drunken man. Conger went on.
As Conger walked, restless, in the night, a form loomed in front of him. He stopped, holding his breath.
"Who is it?" a man's voice came. Conger waited, tense.
"Who is it?" the man said again. He clicked something in his hand. A light flashed. Conger moved.
"It's me," he said.
"Who is 'me'?"
"Conger is my name. I'm staying at the Appleton's place. Who are you?"
The man came slowly up to him. He was wearing a leather jacket. There was a gun at his waist.
"I'm Sheriff Duff. I think you're the person I want to talk to. You were in Bloom's today, about three o'clock?"
"Bloom's?"
"The fountain. Where the kids hang out." Duff came up beside him, shining his light into Conger's face. Conger blinked.
"Turn that thing away," he said.
A pause. "All right." The light flickered to the ground. "You were there. Some trouble broke out between you and the Willet boy. Is that right? You had a beef over his girl—"
"We had a discussion," Conger said carefully.
"Then what happened?"
"Why?"
"I'm just curious. They say you did something."
"Did something? Did what?"
"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering. They saw a flash, and something seemed to happen. They all blacked out. Couldn't move."
"How are they now?"
"All right."
There was silence.
"Well?" Duff said. "What was it? A bomb?"
"A bomb?" Conger laughed. "No. My cigarette lighter caught fire. There was a leak, and the fluid ignited."
"Why did they all pass out?"
"Fumes."
Silence. Conger shifted, waiting. His fingers moved slowly toward his belt. The Sheriff glanced down. He grunted.
"If you say so," he said. "Anyhow, there wasn't any real harm done." He stepped back from Conger. "And that
Willet is a trouble-maker."

"Good night, then," Conger said. He started past the Sheriff.

"One more thing, Mr. Conger. Before you go. You don't mind if I look at your identification, do you?"

"No. Not at all." Conger reached into his pocket. He held his wallet out. The Sheriff took it and shined his flashlight on it. Conger watched, breathing shallowly. They had worked hard on the wallet, studying historic documents, relics of the times, all the papers they felt would be relevant.


When Conger reached the house he found the Appletons sitting around the television set. They did not look up as he came in. He lingered at the door.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Mrs. Appleton turned slowly. "Can I ask you—what's the date?"

"The date?" She studied him. "The first of December."

"December first! Why, it was just November!"

They were all looking at him. Suddenly he remembered. In the twentieth century they still used the old twelve-month system. November fed directly into December; there was no Quartember between.

He gasped. Then it was tomorrow! The second of December! Tomorrow!

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks."

He went up the stairs. What a fool he was, forgetting. The Founder had been taken into captivity on the second of December, according to the newspaper records. Tomorrow, only twelve hours hence, the Founder would appear to speak to the people and then be dragged away.

The day was warm and bright. Conger's shoes crunched the melting crust of snow. On he went, through the trees heavy with white. He climbed a hill and strode down the other side, sliding as he went.

He stopped to look around. Everything was silent. There was no one in sight. He brought a thin rod from his waist and turned the handle of it. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a shimmering in the air.

The crystal cage appeared and settled slowly down. Conger sighed. It was good to see it again. After all, it was his only way back.

He walked up on the ridge. He looked around with some satisfaction, his hands on his hips. Hudson's field was spread out, all the way to the beginning of town. It was bare and flat, covered with a thin layer of snow.

Here, the Founder would come. Here, he would speak to them. And here the authorities would take him.

Only he would be dead before they came. He would be dead before he even spoke.

Conger returned to the crystal globe. He pushed through the door and stepped inside. He took the Slem-gun from the shelf and screwed the bolt into place. It was ready to go, ready to fire. For a moment he considered. Should he have it with him?

No. It might be hours before the Founder came, and suppose someone approached him in the meantime? When he saw the Founder coming toward the field, then he could go and get the gun.

Conger looked toward the shelf. There was the neat plastic package. He took it down and unwrapped it.

He held the skull in his hands, turning it over. In spite of himself, a cold feeling rushed through him. This was the man's skull, the skull of the Founder, who was still alive, who would come here, this day, who would stand on the field not fifty yards away.

What if he could see this, his own skull, yellow and eroded? Two centuries old. Would he still speak? Would he speak, if he could see it, the grinning, aged skull? What would there be for him to say, to tell the people? What message could he bring?

What action would not be futile, when a man could look upon his own aged, yellowed skull? Better they should enjoy their temporary lives, while they still had them to enjoy.

A man who could hold his own skull in his hands would believe in few causes, few movements. Rather, he would preach the opposite—

A sound. Conger dropped the skull back on the shelf and took up the gun. Outside something was moving. He went quickly to the door, his heart beating. Was it he? Was it the Founder, wandering by himself in the cold, looking for a place to speak? Was he meditating over his words, choosing his sentences?

What if he could see what Conger had held!

He pushed the door open, the gun raised.

Lora!

He stared at her. She was dressed in a wool jacket and boots, her hands in her pockets. A cloud of steam came from her mouth and nostrils. Her breast was rising and falling.

Silently, they looked at each other. At last Conger lowered the gun.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She pointed. She did not seem able to speak. He frowned; what was wrong with her?
"What is it?" he said. "What do you want?" He looked in the direction she had pointed. "I don't see anything."
"They're coming."
"They? Who? Who are coming?"
"They are. The police. During the night the Sheriff had the state police send cars. All around, everywhere. Blocking the roads. There's about sixty of them coming. Some from town, some around behind."
She stopped, gasping. "They said—they said—"
"What?"
"They said you were some kind of a Communist. They said—"
Conger went into the cage. He put the gun down on the shelf and came back out. He leaped down and went to the girl.
"Thanks. You came here to tell me? You don't believe it?"
"I don't know."
"Did you come alone?"
"No. Joe brought me in his truck. From town."
"Joe? Who's he?"
"Joe French. The plumber. He's a friend of Dad's."
"Let's go."
They crossed the snow, up the ridge and onto the field. The little panel truck was parked half way across the field. A heavy short man was sitting behind the wheel, smoking his pipe. He sat up as he saw the two of them coming toward him.
"Are you the one?" he said to Conger.
"Yes. Thanks for warning me."
The plumber shrugged. "I don't know anything about this. Lora says you're all right." He turned around. "It might interest you to know some more of them are coming. Not to warn you—just curious."
"More of them?" Conger looked toward the town. Black shapes were picking their way across the snow.
"People from the town. You can't keep this sort of thing quiet, not in a small town. We all listen to the police radio; they heard the same way Lora did. Someone tuned in, spread it around—"
The shapes were getting closer. Conger could, make out a couple of them. Bill Willet was there, with some boys from the high school. The Appletons were along, hanging back in the rear.
"Even Ed Davies," Conger murmured.
The storekeeper was toiling onto the field, with three or four other men from the town.
"All curious as hell," French said. "Well, I guess I'm going back to town. I don't want my truck shot full of holes. Come on, Lora."
She was looking up at Conger, wide-eyed.
"Come on," French said again. "Let's go. You sure as hell can't stay here, you know."
"Why?"
"There may be shooting. That's what they all came to see. You know that don't you, Conger?"
"Yes."
"You have a gun? Or don't you care?" French smiled a little. "They've picked up a lot of people in their time, you know. You won't be lonely."
He cared, all right! He had to stay here, on the field. He couldn't afford to let them take him away. Any minute the Founder would appear, would step onto the field. Would he be one of the townsmen, standing silently at the foot of the field, waiting, watching?
Or maybe he was Joe French. Or maybe one of the cops. Anyone of them might find himself moved to speak.
And the few words spoken this day were going to be important for a long time.
And Conger had to be there, ready when the first word was uttered!
"I care," he said. "You go on back to town. Take the girl with you."
Lora got stiffly in beside Joe French. The plumber started up the motor. "Look at them, standing there," he said. "Like vultures. Waiting to see someone get killed."
The truck drove away, Lora sitting stiff and silent, frightened now. Conger watched for a moment. Then he dashed back into the woods, between the trees, toward the ridge.
He could get away, of course. Anytime he wanted to he could get away. All he had to do was to leap into the crystal cage and turn the handles. But he had a job, an important job. He had to be here, here at this place, at this time.
He reached the cage and opened the door. He went inside and picked up the gun from the shelf. The Slem-gun would take care of them. He notched it up to full count. The chain reaction from it would flatten them all, the police, the curious, sadistic people—
They wouldn't take him! Before they got him, all of them would be dead. He would get away. He would escape. By the end of the day they would all be dead, if that was what they wanted, and he—

He saw the skull.

Suddenly he put the gun down. He picked up the skull. He turned the skull over. He looked at the teeth. Then he went to the mirror.

He held the skull up, looking in the mirror. He pressed the skull against his cheek. Beside his own face the grinning skull leered back at him, beside his skull, against his living flesh.

He bared his teeth. And he knew.

It was his own skull that he held. He was the one who would die. He was the Founder.

After a time he put the skull down. For a few minutes he stood at the controls, playing with them idly. He could hear the sound of motors outside, the muffled noise of men. Should he go back to the present, where the Speaker waited? He could escape, of course—

Escape?

He turned toward the skull. There it was, his skull, yellow with age. Escape? Escape, when he had held it in his own hands?

What did it matter if he put it off a month, a year, ten years, even fifty? Time was nothing. He had sipped chocolate with a girl born a hundred and fifty years before his time. Escape? For a little while, perhaps.

But he could not really escape, no more so than anyone else had ever escaped, or ever would.

Only, he had held it in his hands, his own bones, his own death's-head.

They had not.

He went out the door and across the field, empty handed. There were a lot of them standing around, gathered together, waiting. They expected a good fight; they knew he had something. They had heard about the incident at the fountain.

And there were plenty of police—police with guns and tear gas, creeping across the hills and ridges, between the trees, closer and closer. It was an old story, in this century.

One of the men tossed something at him. It fell in the snow by his feet, and he looked down. It was a rock. He smiled.

"Come on!" one of them called. "Don't you have any bombs?"

"Throw a bomb! You with the beard! Throw a bomb!"

"Let 'em have it!"

"Toss a few A Bombs!"

They began to laugh. He smiled. He put his hands to his hips. They suddenly turned silent, seeing that he was going to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I don't have any bombs. You're mistaken."

There was a flurry of murmuring.

"I have a gun," he went on. "A very good one. Made by science even more advanced than your own. But I'm not going to use that, either."

They were puzzled.

"Why not?" someone called. At the edge of the group an older woman was watching. He felt a sudden shock. He had seen her before. Where?

He remembered. The day at the library. As he had turned the corner he had seen her. She had noticed him and been astounded. At the time, he did not understand why.

Conger grinned. So he would escape death, the man who right now was voluntarily accepting it. They were laughing, laughing at a man who had a gun but didn't use it. But by a strange twist of science he would appear again, a few months later, after his bones had been buried under the floor of a jail.

And so, in a fashion, he would escape death. He would die, but then, after a period of months, he would live again, briefly, for an afternoon.

An afternoon. Yet long enough for them to see him, to understand that he was still alive. To know that somehow he had returned to life.

And then, finally, he would appear once more, after two hundred years had passed. Two centuries later. He would be born again, born, as a matter of fact, in a small trading village on Mars. He would grow up, learning to hunt and trade—

A police car came on the edge of the field and stopped. The people retreated a little. Conger raised his hands.

"I have an odd paradox for you," he said. "Those who take lives will lose their own. Those who kill, will die. But he who gives his own life away will live again!"

They laughed, faintly, nervously. The police were coming out, walking toward him. He smiled. He had said
everything he intended to say. It was a good little paradox he had coined. They would puzzle over it, remember it.

Smiling, Conger awaited a death foreordained.

THE END

Contents

THE EYE OF ALLAH
By Charles W. Diffin

On the fatal seventh of September a certain Secret Service man sat in the President's chair and--looked back
into the Eye of Allah.

Blinky Collins' part in this matter was very brief. Blinky lasted just long enough to make a great discovery, to
brag about it as was Blinky's way, and then pass on to find his reward in whatever hereafter is set apart for weak-
minded crooks whose heads are not hard enough to withstand the crushing impact of a lead-filled pacifier.

The photograph studio of Blinky Collins was on the third floor of a disreputable building in an equally
unsavory part of Chicago. There were no tinted pictures of beautiful blondes nor of stern, square-jawed men of
affairs in Blinky's reception room. His clients, who came furtively there, were strongly opposed to having their
pictures taken--they came for other purposes. For the photographic work of Mr. Collins was strictly commercial--
and peculiar. There were fingerprints to be photographed and identified for purpose of private revenge, photographs
of people to be merged and repictured in compromising closeness for reasons of blackmail. And even X-Ray
photography was included in the scope of his work.

* * * * *

The great discovery came when a box was brought to the dingy room and Mr. Collins was asked to show what
was inside it without the bother and inconvenience of disturbing lock and seals. The X-Ray machine sizzled above
it, and a photographic plate below was developed to show a string of round discs that could easily have been pearls.

The temporary possessor of the box was pleased with the result--but Blinky was puzzled. For the developer had
brought out an odd result. There were the pearls as expected, but, too, there was a small picture superimposed--a
picture of a bald head and a body beneath seated beside a desk. The picture had been taken from above looking
straight down, and head and desk were familiar.

Blinky knew them both. The odd part was that he knew also that both of them were at that instant on the ground
floor of the same disreputable building, directly under and two floors below his workshop.

Like many great discoveries, this of Blinky's came as the result of an accident. He had monkeyed with the X-
Ray generator and had made certain substitutions. And here was the result--a bald head and a desk, photographed
plainly through two heavy wood floors. Blinky scratched his own head in deep thought. And then he repeated the
operation.

This time there was a blonde head close to the bald one, and two people were close to the desk and to each
other. Blinky knew then that there were financial possibilities in this new line of portrait work.

It was some time before the rat eyes of the inventor were able to see exactly what they wanted through this
strange device, but Blinky learned. And he fitted a telescope back of the ray and found that he could look along it
and see as if through a great funnel what was transpiring blocks and blocks away; he looked where he would, and
brick walls or stone were like glass when the new ray struck through them.

Blinky never knew what he had--never dreamed of the tremendous potentialities in his oscillating ethereal ray
that had a range and penetration beyond anything known. But he knew, in a vague way, that this ray was a channel
for light waves to follow, and he learned that he could vary the range of the ray and that whatever light was shown at
the end of that range came to him as clear and distinct as if he were there in the room.

He sat for hours, staring through the telescope. He would train the device upon a building across the street, then
cut down the current until the unseen vibration penetrated inside the building. If there was nothing there of interest
he would gradually increase the power, and the ray would extend out and still out into other rooms and beyond them
to still others. Blinky had a lot of fun, but he never forgot the practical application of the device--practical, that is, from the distorted viewpoint of a warped mind.

* * * * *

"I've heard about your machine," said a pasty-faced man one day, as he sat in Blinky's room, "and I think it's a
lot of hooey. But I'd give just one grand to know who is with the district attorney this minute."

"Where is he?" asked Blinky.

"Two blocks down the street, in the station house ... and if Pokey Barnard is with him, the lousy stool-pigeon--"

Blinky paid no attention to the other's opinion of one Pokey Barnard; he was busy with a sputtering blue light
and a telescope behind a shield of heavy lead.

"Put your money on the table," he said, finally: "there's the dicks ... and there's Pokey. Take a look--"

It was some few minutes later that Blinky learned of another valuable feature in his ray. He was watching the
district attorney when the pasty-faced man brushed against a hanging incandescent light. There was a bit of bare
wire exposed, and as it swung into the ray the fuses in the Collins studio blew out instantly.

But the squinting eyes at the telescope had seen something first. They had seen the spare form of the district
attorney throw itself from the chair as if it had been dealt a blow--or had received an electric shock.

Blinky put in new fuses--heavier ones--and tried it again on another subject. And again the man at the receiving
end got a shot of current that sent him sprawling.

"Now what the devil--" demanded Blinky. He stood off and looked at the machine, the wire with its 110 volts,
the invisible ray that was streaming out.

"It's insulated, the machine is," he told his caller, "so the juice won't shoot back if I keep my hands off; but
why," he demanded profanely, "don't it short on the first thing it touches?"

* * * * *

He was picturing vaguely a ray like a big insulated cable, with light and current both traveling along a core at
its center, cut off, insulated by the ray, so that only the bare end where the ray stopped could make contact.

"Some more of them damn electrons," he hazarded; then demanded of his caller: "But am I one hell of a smart
guy? Or am I?"

There was no denying this fact. The pasty-faced man told Blinky with lurid emphasis just how smart. He had
seen with his own eyes and this was too good to keep.

He paid his one grand and departed, first to make certain necessary arrangements for the untimely end of one
Pokey Barnard, squealer, louse, et cetera, et cetera, and then to spread the glad news through the underworld of
Collins' invention.

That was Blinky's big mistake, as was shown a few days later. Not many had taken seriously the account of the
photographer's experiments, but there was one who had, as was evident. A bearded man, whose eyes stared
somewhat wildly from beneath a shock of frowzy hair, entered the Collins work-room and locked the door behind
him. His English was imperfect, but the heavy automatic in his hand could not be misunderstood. He forced the
trembling inventor to give a demonstration, and the visitor's face showed every evidence of delight.

"The cur-rent," he demanded with careful words, "the electreek cur-rent, you shall do also. Yes?"

Again the automatic brought quick assent, and again the visitor showed his complete satisfaction. Showed it by
slugging the inventor quietly and efficiently and packing the apparatus in the big suitcase he had brought.

Blinky Collins had been fond of that machine. He had found a form of television with uncounted possibilities,
and it had been for him the perfect instrument of a blackmailing Peeping Tom; he had learned the secret of directed
wireless transmission of power and had seen it as a means for annoying his enemies. Yet Blinky Collins--the late
Blinky Collins--offered no least objection, when the bearded man walked off with the machine. His body, sprawled
awkwardly in the corner, was quite dead....

* * * * *

And now, some two months later, in his Washington office, the Chief of the United States Secret Service
pushed a paper across his desk to a waiting man and leaned back in his chair.

"What would you make of that, Del?" he asked.

Robert Delamater reached leisurely for the paper. He regarded it with sleepy, half-closed eyes.

There was a crude drawing of an eye at the top. Below was printed--not written--a message in careful, precise
letters: "Take warning. The Eye of Allah is upon you. You shall instructions receive from time to time. Follow them.
Obey."

Delamater laughed. "Why ask me what I think of a nut letter like that. You've had plenty of them just as crazy."

"This didn't come to me," said the Chief; "it was addressed to the President of the United States."

"Well, there will be others, and we will run the poor sap down. Nothing out of the ordinary I should say."

"That is what I thought--at first. Read this--" The big, heavy-set man pushed another and similar paper across
the desk. "This one was addressed to the Secretary of State."

Delamater did not read it at once. He held both papers to the light; his fingers touched the edges only.

"No watermark," he mused; "ordinary white writing stock--sold in all the five and ten cent stores. Tried these
for fingerprints I suppose?".
"Read it," suggested the Chief.
"Another picture of an eye," said Delamater aloud, and read: "'Warning. You are dealing with an emissary from a foreign power who is an unfriend of my country. See him no more. This is the first and last warning. The Eye of Allah watches.'

'And what is this below--? 'He did not care for your cigars, Mr. Secretary. Next time--but there must be no next time.'"

Delamater read slowly--lazily. He seemed only slightly interested except when he came to the odd conclusion of the note. But the Chief knew Delamater and knew how that slow indolence could give place to a feverish, alert concentration when work was to be done.

"Crazy as a loon," was the man's conclusion as he dropped the papers upon the desk.
"Crazy," his chief corrected, "like a fox! Read the last line again; then get this--

"The Secretary of State _is_ meeting with a foreign agent who is here very much incog. Came in as a servant of a real ambassador. Slipped quietly into Washington, and not a soul knew he was here. He met the Secretary in a closed room; no one saw him come or leave--";

"Well, the Secretary tells me that in that room where nobody could see he offered this man a cigar. His visitor took it, tried to smoke it, apologized--and lit one of his own vile cigarettes."

"Hm-m!" Delamater sat a little straighter in his chair; his eyebrows were raised now in questioning astonishment. "Dictaphone? Some employee of the Department listening in?"

"Impossible."

"Now that begins to be interesting," the other conceded. His eyes had lost their sleepy look. "Want me to take it on?"

"Later. Right now. I want you to take this visiting gentleman under your personal charge. Here is the name and the room and hotel where he is staying. He is to meet with the Secretary to-night--he knows where. You will get to him unobserved--absolutely unseen; I can leave that to you. Take him yourself to his appointment, and take him without a brass band. But have what men you want tail you and watch out for spies.... Then, when he is through, bring him back and deliver him safely to his room. Compray?"

"Right--give me Wilkins and Smeed. I rather think I can get this bird there and back without being seen, but perhaps they may catch Allah keeping tabs on us at that." He laughed amusedly as he took the paper with the name and address.

A waiter with pencil and order-pad might have been seen some hours later going as if from the kitchen to the ninth floor of a Washington hotel. And the same waiter, a few minutes later, was escorting a guest from a rear service-door to an inconspicuous car parked nearby. The waiter slipped behind the wheel.

A taxi, whose driver was half asleep, was parked a hundred feet behind them at the curb. As they drove away and no other sign of life was seen in the quiet street the driver of the taxi yawned ostentatiously and decided to seek a new stand. He neglected possible fares until a man he called Smeed hailed him a block farther on. They followed slowly after the first car ... and they trailed it again on its return after some hours.

"Safe as a church," they reported to the driver of the first car. "We'll swear that nobody was checking up on that trip."

And: "O. K." Delamater reported to his chief the next morning. "Put one over on this self-appointed Allah that time."

But the Chief did not reply: he was looking at a slip of paper like those he had shown his operative the day before. He tossed it to Delamater and took up the phone.

"To the Secretary of State," Delamater read. "You had your warning. Next time you disobey it shall be you who dies."

The signature was only the image of an eye.

The Chief was calling a number; Delamater recognized it as that of the hotel he had visited. "Manager, please, at once," the big man was saying.

He identified himself to the distant man. Then: "Please check up on the man in nine four seven. If he doesn't answer, enter the room and report at once--I will hold the phone...."

The man at the desk tapped steadily with a pencil; Robert Delamater sat quietly, tensely waiting. But some sixth sense told him what the answer would be. He was not surprised when the Chief repeated what the phone had whispered.

"Dead?... Yes!... Leave everything absolutely undisturbed. We will be right over."
“Get Doctor Brooks, Del,” he said quietly; “the Eye of Allah was watching after all.”

Robert Delamater was silent as they drove to the hotel. Where had he slipped? He trusted Smeed and Wilkins entirely; if they said his car had not been followed it had not. And the visitor had been disguised; he had seen to that. Then, where had this person stood--this being who called himself the Eye of Allah?

"Chief," he said finally. "I didn't slip--nor Wilkins or Smeed."

"Someone did," replied the big man, "and it wasn't the Eye of Allah, either."

The manager of the hotel was waiting to take them to the room. He unlocked the door with his pass key.

"Not a thing touched," he assured the Secret Service men; "there he is, just the way we found him."

In the doorway between the bedroom and bath a body was huddled. Doctor Brooks knelt quickly beside it. His hands worked swiftly for a moment, then he rose to his feet.

"Dead," he announced.

"How long?" asked the Chief.

"Some time. Hours I should say--perhaps eight or ten."

"Cause?" the query was brief.

"It will take an autopsy to determine that. There is no blood or wound to be seen."

* * * * *

The doctor was again examining the partly rigid body. He opened one hand; it held a cake of soap. There was a grease mark on the hand.

Delamater supplied the explanation. "He touched some grease on the old car I was using," he said. "Must have gone directly to wash it off. See--there is water spilled on the floor."

Water had indeed been splashed on the tile floor of the bath room; a pool of it still remained about the heavy, foreign-looking shoes of the dead man.

Something in it caught Delamater's eye. He leaned down to pick up three pellets of metal, like small shot, round and shining.

"I'll keep these," he said, "though the man was never killed with shot as small as that."

"We shall have to wait for the autopsy report," said the Chief crisply; "that may give the cause of death. Was there anyone in the room--did you enter it with him last night, Del?"

"No," said the operative; "he was very much agitated when we got here--dismissed me rather curtly at the door. He was quite upset about something--spoke English none too well and said something about a warning and damned our Secret Service as inefficient."

"A warning!" said the Chief. The dead man's brief case was on the bed. He crossed to it and undid the straps; the topmost paper told the reason for the man's disquiet. It showed the familiar, staring eye. And beneath the eye was a warning: this man was to die if he did not leave Washington at once.

The Chief turned to the hotel manager. "Was the door locked?"

"Yes."

"But it is a spring lock. Someone could have gone out and closed it after him."

"Not this time. The dead-bolt was thrown. It takes a key to do that from the outside or this thumb-turn on the inside. The hotel man demonstrated the action of the heavy bolt."

"Then, with a duplicate key, a man could have left this room and locked the door behind him."

"Absolutely not. The floor-clerk was on duty all night. I have questioned her: this room was under her eyes all the time. She saw this man return, saw your man, here"--and he pointed to Delamater--"leave him at the door. There was no person left the room after that."

"See about the autopsy, Doctor," the Chief ordered.

And to the manager: "Not a thing here must be touched. Admit only Mr. Delamater and no one else unless he vouches for them."

"Del," he told the operative, "I'm giving you a chance to make up for last night. Go to it."

And Robert Delamater "went to it" with all the thoroughness at his command, and with a total lack of result.

* * * * *

The autopsy helped not at all. The man was dead; it was apparently a natural death. "Not a scratch nor a mark on him," was the report. But: "... next time it will be you," the note with the staring eye had warned the Secretary of State. The writer of it was taking full credit for the mysterious death.

Robert Delamater had three small bits of metal, like tiny shot, and he racked his brain to connect these with the death. There were fingerprints, too, beautifully developed upon the mysterious missives--prints that tallied with none in the records. There were analyses of the paper--of the ink--and not a clue in any of them.

Just three pellets of metal. Robert Delamater had failed utterly, and he was bitter in the knowledge of his failure.
"He had you spotted, Del," the Chief insisted. "The writer of these notes may be crazy, but he was clever enough to know that this man _did_ see the Secretary. And he was waiting for him when he came back; then he killed him."

"Without a mark?"

"He killed him," the Chief repeated; "then he left--and that's that."

"But," Delamater objected, "the room clerk--"

"--took a nap," broke in the Chief. But Delamater could not be satisfied with the explanation.

"He got his, all right," he conceded, "--got it in a locked room nine stories above the street, with no possible means of bringing it upon himself--and no way for the murderer to escape. I tell you there is something more to this: just the letter to the Secretary, as if this Eye of Allah were spying upon him--"

The Chief waved all that aside. "A clever spy," he insisted. "Too clever for you. And a darn good guesser; he had us all fooled. But we're dealing with a madman, not a ghost, and he didn't sail in through a ninth story window nor go out through a locked door; neither did he spy on the Secretary of State in his private office. Don't try to make a supernatural mystery out of a failure, Del."

The big man's words were tempered with a laugh, but there was an edge of sarcasm, ill-concealed.

* * * * *

And then came the next note. And the next. The letters were mailed at various points in and about the city; they came in a flood. And they were addressed to the President of the United States, to the Secretary of War--of the Navy--to all the Cabinet members. And all carried the same threat under the staring eye.

The United States, to this man, represented all that was tyrannical and oppressive to the downtrodden of the earth. He proposed to end it--this government first, then others in their turn. It was the outpouring of a wildly irrational mind that came to the office of the harassed Chief of the United States Secret Service, who had instructions to run this man down--this man who signed himself The Eye of Allah. And do it quickly for the notes were threatening. Official Washington, it seemed, was getting jumpy and was making caustic inquiries as to why a Secret Service department was maintained.

The Chief, himself, was directing the investigation--and getting nowhere.

"Here is the latest," he said one morning. "Mailed at New York." Delamater and a dozen other operatives were in his office: he showed them a letter printed like all the others. There was the eye, and beneath were words that made the readers catch their breath.

"The Eye of Allah sees--it has warned--now it will destroy. The day of judgment is at hand. The battleship _Maryland_ is at anchor in the Hudson River at New York. No more shall it be the weapon of a despot government. It will be destroyed at twelve o'clock on September fifth."

"Wild talk," said the Chief, "but today is the fourth. The Commander of the _Maryland_ has been warned--approach by air or water will be impossible. I want you men to patrol the shore and nail this man if he shows up. Lord knows what he intends--bluffing probably--but he may try some fool stunt. If he does--get him!"

* * * * *

Eleven-thirty by the watch on Robert Delamater's wrist found him seated in the bow of a speed-boat the following morning. They patrolled slowly up and down the shore. There were fellow operatives, he knew, scores of them, posted at all points of vantage along the docks.

Eleven forty-five--and the roar of seaplanes came from above where air patrols were-guarding the skies. Small boats drove back and forth on set courses; no curious sight-seeing craft could approach the _Maryland_ that day. On board the battleship, too, there was activity apparent. A bugle sounded, and the warning of bellowing Klaxons echoed across the water. Here, in the peace and safety of the big port, the great man-of-war was sounding general quarters, and a scurry of running men showed for an instant on her decks. Anti-aircraft guns swung silently upon imaginary targets--

The watcher smiled at the absurdity of it all--this preparation to repel the attack of a wild-eyed writer of insane threats. And yet--and yet-- He knew, too, there was apprehension in his frequent glances at his watch.

One minute to go! Delamater should have watched the shore. And, instead, he could not keep his eyes from the big fighting-ship silhouetted so clearly less than a mile away, motionless and waiting--waiting--for what? He saw the great turreted guns, useless against this puny, invisible opponent. Above them the fighting tops were gleaming. And above them--

Delamater shaded his eyes with a quick, tense hand: the tip of the mast was sparkling. There was a blue flash that glinted along the steel. It was gone to reappear on the fighting top itself--then lower.

* * * * *

What was it? the watching man was asking himself. What did it bring to mind? A street-car? A defective trolley? The zipping flash of a contact made and broken? That last!
Like the touch of an invisible wire, tremendously charged, a wire that touched and retreated, that made and lost its contact, the flashing arc was working toward the deck. It felt its way to the body of the ship; the arc was plain, starting from mid-air to hiss against the armored side; the arc shortened--went to nothing--vanished.... A puff of smoke from an open port proved its presence inside. Delamater had the conviction that a deadly something had gone through the ship's side--was insulated from it--was searching with its blazing, arcing end for the ammunition rooms....

The realization of that creeping menace came to Delamater with a gripping, numbing horror. The seconds were almost endless as he waited. Slowly, before his terrified eyes, the deck of the ship bulged upward ... slowly it rolled and tore apart ... a mammoth turret with sixteen-inch guns was lifting unhurriedly into the air ... there were bodies of men rocketing skyward....

The mind of the man was racing at lightning speed, and the havoc before him seemed more horrible in its slow, leisurely progress. If he could only move--do something!

The shock of the blasted air struck him sprawling into the bottom of the boat; the listener was hammered almost to numbness by the deafening thunder that battered and tore through the still air. At top speed the helmsman drove for the shelter of a hidden cove. They made it an instant before the great waves struck high upon the sand spit. Over the bay hung a ballooning cloud of black and gray--lifting for an instant to show in stark ghastliness the wreckage, broken and twisted, that marked where the battleship _Maryland_ rested in the mud in the harbor of New York.

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The eyes of the Secret-Service men were filled with the indelible impress of what they had seen. Again and again, before him, came the vision of a ship full of men in horrible, slow disintegration; his mind was numbed and his actions and reactions were largely automatic. But somehow he found himself in the roar of the subway, and later he sat in a chair and knew he was in a Pullman of a Washington train.

He rode for hours in preoccupied silence, his gaze fixed unseeingly, striving to reach out and out to some distant, unknown something which he was trying to visualize. But he looked at intervals at his hand that held three metal pellets.

He was groping for the mental sequence which would bring the few known facts together and indicate their cause. A threat--a seeming spying within a closed and secret room--the murder on the ninth floor, a murder without trace of wound or weapon. Weapon! He stared again at the tangible evidence he held; then shook his head in perplexed abstraction. No--the man was killed by unknown means.

And now--the _Maryland_! And a visible finger of death--touching, flashing, feeling its way to the deadly cargo of powder sacks.

Not till he sat alone with his chief did he put into words his thoughts.

"A time bomb did it," the Chief was saying. "The officials deny it, but what other answer is there? No one approached that ship--you know that, Del--no torpedo nor aerial bomb! Nothing as fanciful as that!"

Robert Delamater's lips formed a wry smile. "Nothing as fanciful as that"--and he was thinking, thinking--of what he hardly dared express.

"We will start with the ship's personnel," the other continued; "find every man who was not on board when the explosion occurred--"

"No use," the operative interrupted; "this was no inside job, Chief." He paused to choose his words while the other watched him curiously.

"Someone _did_ reach that ship--reached it from a distance--reached it in the same way they reached that poor devil I left at room nine forty-seven. Listen--"

* * * * *

He told his superior of his vigil on the speed-boat--of the almost invisible flash against the ship's mast. "He reached it, Chief," he concluded; "he felt or saw his way down and through the side of that ship. And he fired their ammunition from God knows where."

"I wonder," said the big man slowly; "I wonder if you know just what you are trying to tell me--just how absurd your idea is. Are you seriously hinting at long-distance vision through solid armor-plate--through these walls of stone and steel? And wireless power-transmission through the same wall--!"

"Exactly!" said the operative.

"Why, Del, you must be as crazy as this Eye of Allah individual. It's impossible."

"That word," said Delamater, quietly, "has been crossed out of scientific books in the past few years."

"What do you mean?"

"You have studied some physical science, of course?" Delamater asked. The Chief nodded.

"Then you know what I mean. I mean that up to recent years science had all the possibilities and impossibilities neatly divided and catalogued. Ignorance, as always, was the best basis for positive assurance. Then they got inside
the atom. And since then your real scientist has been a very humble man. He has seen the impossibility of yesterday become the established fact of to-day."

The Chief of the United States Secret Service was tapping with nervous irritation on the desk before him.

"Yes, yes!" he agreed, and again he looked oddly at his operative. "Perhaps there is something to that; you work along that line, Del: you can have a free hand. Take a few days off, a little vacation if you wish. Yes--and ask Sprague to step in from the other office; he has the personnel list."

* * * * *

Robert Delamater felt the other's eyes follow him as he left the room. "And that about lets me out," he told himself; "he thinks I've gone cuckoo, now."

He stopped in a corridor; his fingers, fumbling in a vest pocket, had touched the little metal spheres. Again his mind flashed back to the chain of events he had linked together. He turned toward an inner office.

"I would like to see Doctor Brooks," he said. And when the physician appeared: "About that man who was murdered at the hotel, Doctor--"

"Who died," the doctor corrected; "we found no evidence of murder."

"Who was murdered," the operative insisted. "Have you his clothing where I can examine it?"

"Sure," agreed the physician. He led Delamater to another room and brought out a box of the dead man's effects.

"But if it's murder you expect to prove you'll find no help in this," the Secret Service man nodded. "I'll look them over, just the same," he said. "Thanks."

Along in the room, he went over the clothing piece by piece. Again he examined each garment, each pocket, the lining, as he had done before when first he took the case. Metal, he thought, he must find metal.

But only when a heavy shoe was in his hands did the anxious frown relax from about his eyes.

"Of course," he whispered, half aloud. "What a fool I was! I should have thought of that."

The soles of the shoes were sewed, but, beside the stitches were metal specks, where cobbler's nails were driven. And in the sole of one shoe were three tiny holes.

"Melted!" he said exultantly. "Crazy, am I, Chief? This man was standing on a wet floor; he made a perfect ground. And he got a jolt that melted these nails when it flashed out of him."

He wrapped the clothing carefully and replaced it in the box. And he fingered the metal pellets in his pocket as he slipped quietly from the room.

* * * * *

He did not stop to talk with Doctor Brooks; he wanted to think, to ponder upon the incredible proof of the theory he had hardly dared believe. The Eye of Allah--the maniac--was real; and his power for evil! There was work to be done, and the point of beginning was not plain.

How far did the invisible arm reach? How far could the Eye of Allah see? Where was the generator--the origin of this wireless power; along what channel did it flow? A ray of lightless light--an unseen ethereal vibration.... Delamater could only guess at the answers.

The current to kill a man or to flash a spark into silken powder bags need not be heavy, he knew. Five hundred-a thousand volts--if the mysterious conductor carried it without resistance and without loss. People had been killed by house-lighting currents--a mere 110 volts--when conditions were right. There would be no peculiar or unusual demand upon the power company to point him toward the hidden maniac.

He tossed restlessly throughout the night, and morning brought no answer to his repeated questions. But it brought a hurry call from his Chief.

"Right away," was the instruction; "don't lose a minute. Come to the office."

He found the big man at his desk. He was quiet, unhurried, but the operative knew at a glance the tense repression that was being exercised--the iron control of nerves that demanded action and found incompetence and helplessness instead.

"I don't believe your fantastic theories," he told Delamater. "Impractical--impossible! But--" He handed the waiting man a paper. "We must not leave a stone unturned."

Delamater said nothing; he looked at the paper in his hand. "To the President of the United States," he read. "Prepare to meet your God. Friday. The eighth. Twelve o'clock."

The signature he hardly saw; the staring, open eye was all too familiar.

"That is to-morrow," said Delamater softly. "The President dies to-morrow."

* * * * *

"No!" exploded the Chief. "Do you realize what that means? The President murdered--more killings to follow--and the killer unknown! Why the country will be in a panic: the whole structure of the Government is threatened!"

He paused, then added as he struck his open hand upon the desk: "I will have every available man at the White
"For witnesses?" asked Delamater coldly.
The big man stared at his operative; the lines of his face were sagging.
"Do you believe--really--he can strike him down--at his desk--from a distance?"
"I know it." Delamater's fingers played for a moment with three bits of metal in his pocket. Unconsciously he voiced his thoughts: "Does the President have nails in his shoes, I wonder?"
"What--what's that?" the Chief demanded.
But Delamater made no reply. He was picturing the President. He would be seated at his desk, waiting, waiting... and the bells would be ringing and whistles blowing from distant shops when the bolt would strike.... It would flash from his feet... through the thick rug... through the rug.... It would have to ground.
He paid no heed to his Chief's repeated question. He was seeing, not the rug in the Presidential office, but below it--underneath it--a heavy pad of rubber.
"If he can be insulated--" he said aloud, and stared unseeingly at his eagerly listening superiors--"even the telephone cut--no possible connection with the ground--"
"For God's sake, Del, if you've got an idea--any hope at all! I'm--I'm up against it, Del."
The operative brought his distant gaze back to the room and the man across from him. "Yes," he said slowly, thoughtfully, "I've got the beginning of an idea; I don't see the end of it yet.
"We can cut him off from the ground--the President, I mean--make an insulated island where he sits. But this devil will get him the instant he leaves... unless... unless...."
"Yes--yes?" The Chief's voice was high-pitched with anxious impatience; for the first time he was admitting to himself his complete helplessness in this emergency.
"Unless," said Delamater, as the idea grew and took shape, "unless that wireless channel works both ways. If it does... if it does...."
The big man made a gesture of complete incomprehension.
"Wait!" said Robert Delamater, sharply. If ever his sleepy indolence had misled his Chief, there was none to do so now in the voice that rang like cold steel. His eyes were slits under the deep-drawn brows, and his mouth was one straight line.

To the hunter there is no greater game than man. And Robert Delamater, man-hunter, had his treacherous quarry in sight. He fired staccato questions at his Chief.
"Is the President at his desk at twelve?"
"Yes."
"Does he know--about this?"
"Yes."
"Does he know it means death?"
The Chief nodded.
"I see a way--a chance," said the operative. "Do I get a free hand?"
"Yes--Good Lord, yes! If there's any chance of--"
Delamater silenced him. "I'll be the one to take the chance," he said grimly. "Chief, I intend to impersonate the President."
"Now listen-- The President and I are about the same build. I know a man who can take care of the make-up; he will get me by anything but a close inspection. This Eye of Allah, up to now, has worked only in the light. We'll have to gamble on that and work our change in the dark.
"The President must go to bed as usual--impress upon him that he may be under constant surveillance. Then, in the night, he leaves--"
"Oh, I know he won't want to hide himself, but he must. That's up to you."
"Arrange for me to go to his room before daylight. From that minute on I am the President. Get me his routine for that morning; I must follow it so as to arouse no least suspicion."

"But I don't see--" began the Chief. "You will impersonate him--yes--but what then? You will be killed if this maniac makes good. Is the President of the United States to be a fugitive? Is--"
"Hold on, hold on!" said Delamater. He leaned back in his chair; his face relaxed to a smile, then a laugh.
"I've got it all now. Perhaps it will work. If not--" A shrug of the shoulders completed the thought. "And I have been shooting it to you pretty fast haven't I? Now here is the idea--"
"I must be in the President's chair at noon. This Allah person will be watching in, so I must be acting the part all morning. I will have the heaviest insulation I can get under the rug, and I'll have something to take the shot
instead of myself. And perhaps, perhaps I will send a message back to the Eye of Allah that will be a surprise.

"Is it a bet?" he asked. "Remember, I'm taking the chance--unless you know some better way--"

The Chief's chair came down with a bang. "We'll gamble on it, Del," he said; "we've got to--there is no other way.... And now what do you want?"

"A note to the White House electrician," said Robert Delamater, "and full authority to ask for anything I may need, from the U. S. Treasury down to a pair of wire-cutters."

His smile had become contagious; the Chief's anxious look relaxed. "If you pull this off, Del, they may give you the Treasury or the Mint at that. But remember, republics are notoriously ungenerous."

"We'll have to gamble on that, too," said Robert Delamater.

* * * * *

The heart of the Nation is Washington. Some, there are, who would have us feel that New York rules our lives. Chicago--San Francisco--and other great cities sometimes forget that they are mere ganglia on the financial and commercial nervous system. The heart is Washington, and, Congress to the contrary notwithstanding, the heart of that heart is not the domed building at the head of Pennsylvania Avenue, but an American home. A simple, gracious mansion, standing in quiet dignity and whiteness above its velvet lawns.

It is the White House that draws most strongly at the interest and curiosity of the homely, common throng that visits the capital.

But there were no casual visitors at the White House on the seventh of September. Certain Senators, even, were denied admittance. The President was seeing only the members of the Cabinet and some few others.

It is given to a Secret Service operative, in his time, to play many parts. But even a versatile actor might pause at impersonating a President. Robert Delamater was acting the role with never a fumble. He sat, this new Robert Delamater, so startlingly like the Chief Executive, in the chair by a flat top desk. And he worked diligently at a mass of correspondence.

Secretaries came and went; files were brought. Occasionally he replied to a telephone call--or perhaps called someone. It would be hard to say which happened, for no telephone bells rang.

On the desk was a schedule that Delamater consulted. So much time for correspondence--so many minutes for a conference with this or that official, men who were warned to play up to this new Chief Executive as if the life of their real President were at stake.

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To any observer the busy routine of the morning must have passed with never a break. And there was an observer, as Delamater knew. He had wondered if the mystic ray might carry electrons that would prove its presence. And now he knew.

The Chief of the U. S. Secret Service had come for a consultation with the President. And whatever lingering doubts may have stifled his reluctant imagination were dispelled when the figure at the desk opened a drawer.

"Notice this," he told the Chief as he appeared to search for a paper in the desk. "An electroscope; I put it in here last night. It is discharging. The ray has been on since nine-thirty. No current to electrocute me--just a penetrating ray."

He returned the paper to the drawer and closed it.

"So that is that," he said, and picked up a document to which he called the visitor's attention.

"Just acting," he explained. "The audience may be critical; we must try to give them a good show! And now give me a report. What are you doing? Has anything else turned up? I am counting on you to stand by and see that that electrician is on his toes at twelve o'clock."

"Stand by is right," the Chief agreed; "that's about all we can do. I have twenty men in and about the grounds--there will be as many more later on. And I know now just how little use we are to you, Del."

"Your expression!" warned Delamater. "Remember you are talking to the President. Very official and all that."

"Right! But now tell me what is the game, Del. If that devil fails to knock you out here where you are safe, he will get you when you leave the room."

"Perhaps," agreed the pseudo-executive, "and again, perhaps not. He won't get me here; I am sure of that. They have this part of the room insulated. The phone wire is cut--my conversations there are all faked."

"There is only one spot in this room where that current can pass. A heavy cable is grounded outside in wet earth. It comes to a copper plate on this desk; you can't see it--it is under those papers."

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"And if the current comes--" began the visitor.

"When it comes," the other corrected, "it will jump to that plate and go off harmlessly--I hope."

"And then what? How does that let you out?"

"Then we will see," said the presidential figure. "And you've been here long enough, Chief. Send in the
President's secretary as you go out."

"He arose to place a friendly, patronizing hand on the other's shoulder.

"Good-by," he said, "and watch that electrician at twelve. He is to throw the big switch when I call."

"Good luck," said the big man huskily. "We've got to hand it to you, Del; you're--"

"Good-by!" The figure of the Chief Executive turned abruptly to his desk.

There was more careful acting--another conference--some dictating. The clock on the desk gave the time as eleven fifty-five. The man before the flat topped desk verified it by a surreptitious glance at his watch. He dismissed the secretary and busied himself with some personal writing.

Eleven fifty-nine--and he pushed paper and pen aside. The movement disturbed some other papers, neatly stacked. They were dislodged, and where they had lain was a disk of dull copper.

"Ready," the man called softly. "Don't stand too near that line." The first boom of noonday bells came faintly to the room.

The President--to all but the other actors in the morning's drama--leaned far back in his chair. The room was suddenly deathly still. The faint ticking of the desk clock was loud and rasping. There was heavy breathing audible in the room beyond. The last noonday chime had died away....

The man at the desk was waiting--waiting. And he thought he was prepared, nerves steeled, for the expected. But he jerked back, to fall with the overturned chair upon the soft, thick-padded rug, at the ripping, crackling hiss that tore through the silent room.

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From a point above the desk a blue arc flamed and wavered. Its unseen terminal moved erratically in the air, but the other end of the deadly flame held steady upon a glowing, copper disc.

Delamater, prone on the floor, saw the wavering point that marked the end of the invisible carrier of the current--saw it drift aside till the blue arc was broken. It returned, and the arc crashed again into blinding flame. Then, as abruptly, the blue menace vanished.

The man on the floor waited, waited, and tried to hold fast to some sense of time.

Then: "Contact!" he shouted. "The switch! Close the switch!"

"Closed!" came the answer from a distant room. There was a shouted warning to unseen men: "Stand back there--back--there's twenty thousand volts on that line--"

Again the silence....

"Would it work? Would it?" Delamater's mind was full of delirious, half-thought hopes. That fiend in some far-off room had cut the current meant as a death-bolt to the Nation's head. He would leave the ray on--look along it to gloat over his easy victory. His generator must be insulated: would he touch it with his hand, now that his own current was off?--make of himself a conductor?

In the air overhead formed a terrible arc.

From the floor, Delamater saw it rip crashingly into life as twenty thousand volts bridged the gap of a foot or less to the invisible ray. It hissed tremendously in the stillness....

And Delamater suddenly buried his face in his hands. For in his mind he was seeing a rigid, searing body, and in his nostrils, acrid, distinct, was the smell of burning flesh.

"Don't be a fool," he told himself fiercely. "Don't be a fool! Imagination!"

The light was out.

"Switch off!" a voice was calling. There was a rush of swift feet from the distant doors; friendly hands were under him--lifting him--as the room, for Robert Delamater, President-in-name of the United States, turned whirlingly, dizzily black....

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Robert Delamater, U. S. Secret Service operative, entered the office of his Chief. Two days of enforced idleness and quiet had been all he could stand. He laid a folded newspaper before the smiling, welcoming man.

"That's it, I suppose," he said, and pointed to a short notice.

"X-ray Operator Killed," was the caption. "Found Dead in Office in Watts Building." He had read the brief item many times.

"That's what we let the reporters have," said the Chief.

"Was he"--the operative hesitated for a moment--"pretty well fried?"

"Quite!"

"And the machine?"

"Broken glass and melted metal. He smashed it as he fell."

"The Eye of Allah," mused Delamater. "Poor devil--poor, crazy devil. Well, we gambled--and we won. How about the rest of the bet? Do I get the Mint?"
"Hell, no!" said the Chief. "Do you expect to win all the time? They want to know why it took us so long to get him.
"Now, there's a little matter out in Ohio, Del, that we'll have to get after--"

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**Contents**

**TREE, SPARE THAT WOODMAN**

By DAVE DRYFOOS

The single thing to fear was fear--ghastly, walking fear!

Stiff with shock, Naomi Heckscher stood just inside the door to Cappy's one-room cabin, where she'd happened to be when her husband discovered the old man's body.

Her nearest neighbor--old Cappy--dead. After all his wire-pulling to get into the First Group, and his slaving to make a farm on this alien planet, dead in bed!

Naomi's mind circled frantically, contrasting her happy anticipations with this shocking actuality. She'd come to call on a friend, she reminded herself, a beloved friend--round, white-haired, rosy-cheeked; lonely because he'd recently become a widower. To her little boy, Cappy was a combination Grandpa and Santa Claus; to herself, a sort of newly met Old Beau.

Her mouth had been set for a sip of his home brew, her eyes had pictured the delight he'd take in and give to her little boy.

She'd walked over with son and husband, expecting nothing more shocking than an ostentatiously stolen kiss. She'd found a corpse. And to have let Cappy die alone, in this strange world ...

She and Ted could at least have been with him, if they'd known.

But they'd been laughing and singing in their own cabin only a mile away, celebrating Richard's fifth birthday. She'd been annoyed when Cappy failed to show up with the present he'd promised Richard. Annoyed--while the old man pulled a blanket over his head, turned his round face to the wall, and died.

Watching compassionately, Naomi was suddenly struck by the matter-of-fact way Ted examined the body. Ted wasn't surprised.

"Why did you tell Richard to stay outside, just now?" she demanded. "How did you know what we'd find here? And why didn't you tell me, so I could keep Richard at home?"

She saw Ted start, scalded by the splash of her self-directed anger, saw him try to convert his wince into a shrug.

"You insisted on coming," he reminded her gently. "I couldn't have kept you home without--without saying too much, worrying you--with the Earth-ship still a year away. Besides, I didn't know for sure, till we saw the tree-things around the cabin."

The tree-things. The trees-that-were-not. Gnarled blue trunks, half-hidden by yellow leaf-needles stretching twenty feet into the sky. Something like the hoary mountain hemlocks she and Ted had been forever photographing on their Sierra honeymoon, seven life-long years ago.

Three of those tree-things had swayed over Cappy's spring for a far longer time than Man had occupied this dreadful planet. Until just now ...

The three of them had topped the rise that hid Cappy's farm from their own. Richard was running ahead like a happily inquisitive puppy. Suddenly he'd stopped, pointing with a finger she distinctly recalled as needing thorough soapy scrubbing.

"Look, Mommie!" he'd said. "Cappy's trees have moved. They're around the cabin, now."

He'd been interested, not surprised. In the past year, Mazda had become Richard's home; only Earth could surprise him.

But, Ted, come to think of it, had seemed withdrawn, his face a careful blank. And she?

"Very pretty," she'd said, and stuffed the tag-end of fear back into the jammed, untidy mental pigeon-hole she used for all unpleasant thoughts. "Don't run too far ahead, dear."

But now she had to know what Ted knew.

"Tell me!" she said.

"These tree-things--"

"There've been other deaths! How many?"
"Sixteen. But I didn't want to tell you. Orders were to leave women and children home when we had that last Meeting, remember."

"What did they say at the Meeting? Out with it, Ted!"

"That--that the tree-things think!"

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Well, unfortunately, no. Look, I'm not trying to tell you that terrestrial trees think, too, nor even that they have a nervous system. They don't. But--well, on Earth, if you've ever touched a lighted match to the leaf of a sensitive plant like the mimosa, say--and I have--you've been struck by the speed with which other leaves close up and droop. I mean, sure, we know that the leaves droop because certain cells exude water and nearby leaves feel the heat of the match. But the others don't, yet they droop, too. Nobody knows how it works ..."

"But that's just defensive!"

"Sure. But that's just on Earth!"

"All right, dear, I won't argue any more. But I still don't understand. Go on about the Meeting."

"Well, they said these tree-things both create and respond to the patterned electrical impulses of the mind. It's something like the way a doctor creates fantasies by applying a mild electric current to the right places on a patient's brain. In the year we've been here, the trees--or some of them--have learned to read from and transmit to our minds. The range, they say, is around fifty feet. But you have to be receptive--"

"Receptive?"

"Fearful. That's the condition. So I didn't want to tell you because you must not let yourself become afraid, Naomi. We're clearing trees from the land, in certain areas. And it's their planet, after all. Fear is their weapon and fear can kill!"

"You still--all you men--should have let us women know! What do you think we are? Besides, I don't really believe you. How can fear kill?"

"Haven't you ever heard of a savage who gets in bad with his witch-doctor and is killed by magic? The savage is convinced, having seen or heard of other cases, that he can be killed. The witch-doctor sees to it he's told he will be killed. And sometimes the savage actually dies--"

"From poison, I've always thought."

"The poison of fear. The physical changes that accompany fear, magnified beyond belief by belief itself."

"But how in the world could all this have affected Cappy? He wasn't a savage. And he was elderly, Ted. A bad heart, maybe. A stroke. Anything."

"He passed his pre-flight physical only a year ago. And--well, he lived all alone. He was careful not to let you see it, but I know he worried about these three trees on his place. And I know he got back from the Meeting in a worried state of mind. Then, obviously, the trees moved--grouped themselves around his cabin within easy range. But don't be afraid of them, Naomi. So long as you're not, they can't hurt you. They're not bothering us now."

"No. But where's Richard?"

Naomi's eyes swept past Ted, encompassing the cabin. No Richard! He'd been left outside ...

Glass tinkled and crashed as she flung back the cabin door. "Richard! Richard!"

Her child was not in sight. Nor within earshot, it seemed.

"Richard Heckscher! Where are you?" Sanity returned with the conventional primness. And it brought her answer.

"Here I am, Mommie! Look-at!"

He was in a tree! He was fifteen feet off the ground, high in the branches of a tree-thing, swaying--

For an instant, dread flowed through Naomi as if in her bloodstream and something was cutting off her breath. Then, as the hands over mouth and throat withdrew, she saw they were Ted's. She let him drag her into the cabin and close the broken door.

"Better not scare Richard," he said quietly, shoving her gently into a chair. "He might fall."

Dumbly she caught her breath, waiting for the bawling out she'd earned.

But Ted said, "Richard keeps us safe. So long as we fear for him, and not ourselves--"

That was easy to do. Outside, she heard a piping call: "Look at me now, Mommie!"

"Showing off!" she gasped. In a flashing vision, Richard was half boy, half vulture, flapping to the ground with a broken wing.

"Here," said Ted, picking up a notebook that had been on the table. "Here's Cappy's present. A homemade picture book. Bait."

"Let me use it!" she said. "Richard may have seen I was scared just now."

Outside again, under the tree, she called, "Here's Cappy's present, Richard. He's gone away and left it for you."

Would he notice how her voice had gone up half an octave, become flat and shrill?
"I'm coming down," Richard said. "Let me down, tree."
He seemed to be struggling. The branches were cagelike. He was caught!
Naomi's struggle was with her voice. "How did you ever get up there?" she called.
"The tree let me up, Mommie," Richard explained solemnly, "but he won't let me down!" He whimpered a little.
He must not become frightened! "You tell that tree you've got to come right down this instant!" she ordered.
She leaned against the cabin for support. Ted came out and slipped his arm around her.
"Break off a few leaves, Richard," he suggested. "That'll show your tree who's boss!"
Standing close against her husband, Naomi tried to stop shaking. But she lacked firm support, for Ted shook, too.

His advice to Richard was sound, though. What had been a trap became, through grudging movement of the branches, a ladder. Richard climbed down, scolding at the tree like an angry squirrel.

* * * * *

Naomi thought she'd succeeded in shutting her mind. But when her little boy slid down the final bit of trunk and came for his present, Naomi broke. Like a startled animal, she thrust the book into his hands, picked him up and ran. Her mind was a jelly, red and quaking.
She stopped momentarily after running fifty yards. "Burn the trees!" she screamed over her shoulder. "Burn the cabin! Burn it all!" She ran on, Ted's answering shouts beyond her comprehension.

Fatigue halted her. At the top of the rise between Cappy's farm and their own, pain and dizziness began flowing over her in waves. She set Richard down on the mauve soil and collapsed beside him.

When she sat up, Richard squatted just out of reach, watching curiously. She made an effort at casualness: "Let's see what Daddy's doing back there."

"He's doing just what you said to, Mommie!" Richard answered indignantly.
Her men were standing together, Naomi realized. She laughed. After a moment, Richard joined her. Then he looked for his book, found it a few paces away, and brought it to her.

"Read to me, Mommie."
"At home," she said.

Activity at Cappy's interested her now. Wisps of smoke were licking around the trees. A tongue of flame lapped at one while she watched. Branches withered. The trees were too slow-moving to escape ... But where was Ted? What had she exposed him to, with her hysterical orders? She held her breath till he moved within sight, standing quietly by a pile of salvaged tools. Behind him the cabin began to smoke.

Ted wasn't afraid, then. He understood what he faced. And Richard wasn't afraid, either, because he didn't understand.

But she? Surreptitiously Naomi pinched her hip till it felt black and blue. That was for being such a fool. She must not be afraid!

"Daddy seems to be staying there," she said. "Let's wait for him at home, Richard."
"Are you going to make Daddy burn our tree?"
She jumped as if stung. Then, consciously womanlike, she sought relief in talk.
"What do you think we should do, dear?"
"Oh, I like the tree, Mommie. It's cool under there. And the tree plays with me."
"How, Richard?"
"If I'm pilot, he's navigator. Or ship, maybe. But he's so dumb, Mommie! I always have to tell him everything. Doesn't know what a fairy is, or Goldilocks, or anything!"
He clutched his book affectionately, rubbing his face on it. "Hurry up, Mommie. It'll be bedtime before you ever read to me!"
She touched his head briefly. "You can look at the book while I fix your supper."

* * * * *

But to explain Cappy's pictures--crudely crayoned cartoons, really--she had to fill in the story they illustrated. She told it while Richard ate: how the intrepid Spaceman gallantly used his ray gun against the villainous Martians to aid the green-haired Princess. Richard spooned up the thrills with his mush, gazing fascinated at Cappy's colorful and fantastic pictures, propped before him on the table. Had Ted been home, the scene might almost have been blissful.
It might have been ... if their own tree hadn't reminded her of Cappy's. Still, she'd almost managed to stuff her fear back into that mental pigeon-hole before their own tree. It was unbelievable, but she'd been glancing out the window every few minutes, so she saw it start. Their own tree began to walk.

Down the hill it came--right there!--framed in the window behind Richard's head, moving slowly but
inexorably on a root system that writhed along the surface. Like some ancient sculpture of Serpents Supporting the Tree of Life. Except that it brought death ...

"Are you sick, Mommie?"

No, not sick. Just something the matter with her throat, preventing a quick answer, leaving no way to keep Richard from turning to look out the window.

"I think our tree is coming to play with me, Mommie."

No, no! Not Richard!

"Remember how you used to say that about Cappy? When he was really coming to see your daddy?"

"But Daddy isn't home!"

"He'll get here, dear. Now eat your supper."

A lot to ask of an excited little boy. And the tree was his friend, it seemed. Cappy's tree had even followed the child's orders. Richard might intercede--

No! Expose him to such danger? How could she think of it?

"Had enough to eat, dear? Wash your hands and face at the pump, and you can stay out and play till Daddy gets home. I--I want----I may have to see your friend, the tree, by myself ..."

"But you haven't finished my story!"

"I will when Daddy gets home. And if I'm not here, you tell Daddy to do it."

"Where are you going, Mommie?"

"I might see Cappy, dear. Now go and wash, please!"

"Sure, Mommie. Don't cry."

Accept his kiss, even if it is from a mouth rimmed with supper. And don't rub it off till he's gone out, you damned fool. You frightened fool. You shaking, sweating, terror-stricken fool.

Who's he going to kiss when you're not here?

The tree has stopped. Our little tree is having its supper. How nice. Sucking sustenance direct from soil with aid of sun and air in true plant fashion—but exhausting our mineral resources.

(How wise of Ted to make you go to those lectures! You wouldn't want to die in ignorance, would you?)

The lecture—come on, let's go back to the lecture! Let's free our soil from every tree or we'll not hold the joint in fee. No, not joint. A vulgarism, teacher would say. Methinks the times are out of joint. Aroint thee, tree!

Now a pinch. Pinch yourself hard in the same old place so it'll hurt real bad. Then straighten your face and go stick your head out the window. Your son is talking—your son, your sun.

Can your son be eclipsed by a tree? A matter of special spatial relationships, and the space is shrinking, friend. The tree is only a few hundred feet from the house. It has finished its little supper and is now running around. Like Richard. With Richard! Congenial, what?

Smile, stupid. Your son speaks. Answer him.

"What, dear?"

"I see Daddy! He just came over the hill. He's running! Can I go meet him, Mommie?"

"No, dear. It's too far."

Too far. Far too far.

"Did you say something to me, Richard?"

"No. I was talking to the tree. I'm the Spaceman and he's the Martian. But he doesn't want to be the Martian!"


You're close enough to get into the game, surely. A hundred and fifty feet, maybe. Effective range, fifty feet.

Rate of motion? Projected time-interval? Depends on which system you observe it from. Richard has a system.

"He doesn't want to play, Mommie. He wants to see you!"

"You tell that tree your Mommie never sees strangers when Daddy isn't home!"

"I'll make him wait!"

Stoutly your pot-bellied little protector prevents his protective mother from going to pot.

"If he won't play, I'll use my ray gun on him!"

Obviously, the tree won't play. Watch your son lift empty hands, arm himself with a weapon yet to be invented, and open fire on the advancing foe.

"Aa-aa-aa!"

So that's how a ray gun sounds!

"You're dead, tree! You're dead! Now you can't play with me any more. You're dead!"

Seeing it happen, then, watching the tree accept the little boy's fantasy as fact, Naomi wondered why she'd never thought of that herself.
So the tree was a treacherous medicine-man, was it? A true-believing witch-doctor? And who could be more susceptible to the poisoning of fear than a witch-doctor who has made fear work--and believes it's being used against him?

It was all over. She and the tree bit the dust together. But the tree was dead, and Naomi merely fainting, and Ted would soon be home ...

Herbert was truly a gentleman robot. The ladies' slightest wish was his command....

Herbert bowed with a muted clank--indicating he probably needed oiling somewhere--and presented Alice with a perfect martini on a silver tray. He stood holding the tray, a white, permanent porcelain smile on his smooth metal face, as Alice sipped the drink and grimaced.

"It's a good martini, Herbert," said Alice. "Thank you. But, dammit, I wish you didn't have that everlasting smile!"

"I am very sorry, Miss Alice, but I am unable to alter myself in any way," replied Herbert in his polite, hollow voice.

He retired to a corner and stood impassively, still holding the tray. Herbert had found a silver deposit and made the tray. Herbert had found sand and made the cocktail glass. Herbert had combined God knew what atmospheric and earth chemicals to make what tasted like gin and vermouth, and Herbert had frozen the ice to chill it.

"Sometimes," said Thera wistfully, "it occurs to me it would be better to live in a mud hut with a real man than in a mansion with Herbert."

The four women lolled comfortably in the living room of their spacious house, as luxurious as anything any of them would have known on distant Earth. The rugs were thick, the furniture was overstuffed, the paintings on the walls were aesthetic and inspiring, the shelves were filled with booktapes and musicapes.

Herbert had done it all, except the booktapes and musicapes, which had been salvaged from the wrecked spaceship.

"Do you suppose we'll ever escape from this best of all possible manless worlds?" asked Betsy, fluffing her thick black hair with her fingers and inspecting herself in a Herbert-made mirror.

"I don't see how," answered blond Alice glumly. "That atmospheric trap would wreck any other ship just as it wrecked ours, and the same magnetic layer prevents any radio message from getting out. No, I'm afraid we're a colony."

"A colony perpetuates itself," reminded sharp-faced Marguerite, acidly. "We aren't a colony, without men."

They were not the prettiest four women in the universe, nor the youngest. The prettiest women and the youngest did not go to space. But they were young enough and healthy enough, or they could not have gone to space.

It had been a year and a half now--an Earth year and a half on a nice little planet revolving around a nice little yellow sun. Herbert, the robot, was obedient and versatile and had provided them with a house, food, clothing, anything they wished created out of the raw elements of earth and air and water. But the bones of all the men who had been aspace with these four ladies lay mouldering in the wreckage of their spaceship.

And Herbert could not create a man. Herbert did not have to have direct orders, and he had tried once to create a man when he had overheard them wishing for one. They had buried the corpse--perfect in every detail except that it never had been alive.

"It's been a hot day," said Alice, fanning her brow. "I wish it would rain."

Silently, Herbert moved from his corner and went out the door.

Marguerite gestured after him with a bitter little laugh.

"It'll rain this afternoon," she said. "I don't know how Herbert does it--maybe with silver iodide. But it'll rain. Wouldn't it have been simpler to get him to air-condition the house, Alice?"

"That's a good idea," said Alice thoughtfully. "We should have had him do it before."

Herbert had not quite completed the task of air-conditioning the house when the other spaceship crashed. They
all rushed out to the smoking site--the four women and Herbert.
   It was a tiny scoutship, and its single occupant was alive.
   He was unconscious, but he was alive. And he was a man!
   They carted him back to the house, tenderly, and put him to bed. They hovered over him like four hens over a
   single chick, waiting and watching for him to come out of his coma, while Herbert scurried about creating and
   administering the necessary medicines.
   "He'll live," said Thera happily. Thera had been a space nurse. "He'll be on his feet and walking around in a few
   weeks."
   "A man!" murmured Betsy, with something like awe in her voice. "I could almost believe Herbert brought him
   here in answer to our prayers."
   "Now, girls," said Alice, "we have to realize that a man brings problems, as well as possibilities."
   There was a matter-of-fact hardness to her tone which almost masked the quiver behind it. There was a defiant
   note of competition there which had not been heard on this little planet before.
   "What do you mean?" asked Thera.
   "I know what she means," said Marguerite, and the new hardness came natural to her. "She means, which one
   of us gets him?"
   Betsy, the youngest, gasped, and her mouth rounded to a startled O. Thera blinked, as though she were coming
   out of a daze.
   "That's right," said Alice. "Do we draw straws, or do we let him choose?"
   "Couldn't we wait?" suggested Betsy timidly. "Couldn't we wait until he gets well?"
   Herbert came in with a new thermometer and poked it into the unconscious man's mouth. He stood by the bed,
   waiting patiently.
   "No, I don't think we can," said Alice. "I think we ought to have it all worked out and agreed on, so there won't
   be any dispute about it."
   "I say, draw straws," said Marguerite. Marguerite's face was thin, and she had a skinny figure.
   Betsy, the youngest, opened her mouth, but Thera forestalled her.
   "We are not on Earth," she said firmly, in her soft, mellow voice. "We don't have to follow terrestrial customs,
   and we shouldn't. There's only one solution that will keep everybody happy--all of us and the man."
   "And that is...?" asked Marguerite drily.
   "Polygamy, of course. He must belong to us all."
   Betsy shuddered but, surprisingly, she nodded.
   "That's well and good," agreed Marguerite, "but we have to agree that no one of us will be favored above the
   others. He has to understand that from the start."
   "That's fair," said Alice, pursing her lips. "Yes, that's fair. But I agree with Marguerite: he must be divided
   equally among the four of us."
   Chattering over the details, the hard competitiveness vanished from their tones, the four left the sickroom to
   prepare supper.

   * * * * *

   After supper they went back in.
   Herbert stood by the bed, the eternal smile of service on his metal face. As always, Herbert had not required a
   direct command to accede to their wishes.
   The man was divided into four quarters, one for each of them. It was a very neat surgical job.

   END
The MONSTER
By Randall Garrett

What will cosmic rays do to a living organism? Will they destroy life, or produce immortality? The eminent Dr. Blair Gaddon thought he knew...

Fred Trent pulled his coupe into the curb and leaned his head out the open window beside him.

"Hi, Joan, need any help?"

He called to a trim-looking girl in a nurse's uniform. Joan Drake was holding on to a leash with both hands, and her slender body was tugging against the leash as she strained against the pull of a Great Dane on the other end.

She looked over her shoulder as Trent called out, her blonde hair glinting in the warm afternoon sunlight. Blue eyes smiled an impish greeting at him.

"Hello, Fred. No thanks. Brutus and I get along famously."

Trent opened the car door and got out. He walked up the sidewalk and stood beside the girl.

"Business must be mighty slack for the great gland specialist, Stanley Fenwick. Is this all he can find for his pretty nurse to do?"

The girl sniffed. "Walking Brutus around has its compensations. At least he doesn't get fresh--like some people I know."

Fred grinned as he saw the huge dog suddenly turn on its leash and raise itself off the ground to stick out a long rapier-like tongue and lick the girl's cheek before she could move her head away.

"Down, Brutus! Down!" she called out, half-laughing.

Trent stepped in and pulled the big animal away from the girl, patting the dog's head as he did so.

"What was that you said about getting fresh?" Trent asked her. "Looks to me like the dog's life is the best around the Fenwick offices."

"Just don't get any ideas!" Joan Drake shot back.

"I've already got them," he replied. "Which reminds me, am I seeing you tonight?"

The girl held a tight grip on the leash and looked at him coyly.

"Let's see. We'll take in a movie, stop for a bite to eat at Joe's Hamburger Palace, and then drive out to North Butte. You'll park the car and then you'll ask me when I'm going to quit my job and settle down raising a family for you, and I'll say--"

"You'll say not until I get the biggest scoop in Arizona, a big raise, and a bonus as a down payment on a house," he completed her sentence.

"There! You see? We might just as well not have our date. In effect, we've had it already."

He looked at her for a long moment, and when he spoke again his voice had lost its humorous note.

"You forgot one very important item. When I ask you that usual question, and after you give your usual answer, I'll take you in my arms and tell you how much you mean to me, and--"

"You win," she interrupted him. "I had forgotten about that."

The dog started to pull against the leash again and Fred reached out to help her hold the big animal in check. Then she looked at him again.

"What brings you to the outskirts of Tucson? Don't tell me there's a big story breaking on the edge of town."

He shook his head. "Not exactly. I'm on my way to the Rocket Research Proving Grounds. Just a routine story on the experiment they're going to pull off this evening. I've got to interview Mathieson, Gaddon, and a few other scientists on the project."

The girl laughed. "That's something of a coincidence. Dr. Blair Gaddon is in Dr. Fenwick's office right now."

Fred Trent's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"That so? Something wrong with him?"

"No. He's just having a physical checkup. Seems to be worried about his heart. Dr. Fenwick didn't need me since it's a routine job, so I took Brutus for a walk."

Trent nodded. "That's a bit of luck. I think I'll stick around and give Gaddon a lift out to the Proving Grounds. I wanted to talk to him anyway."

"In that case," the girl replied, "you can give me a hand putting Brutus back in his kennel. Once he gets out he's something of a problem."
Fred nodded, taking the leash from her hands and feeling the big dog tug against him. "Never could figure out why Fenwick wanted a big hound like this. Seems to me a terrier would be more practical."

"That's a matter of taste," Joan answered. "Dr. Fenwick is very fond of Brutus--and so am I for that matter. But tell me something about this experiment you're covering."

They had turned in at a large Spanish type house that Trent knew served as a combination living quarters and office for the famous gland specialist. He shrugged. "Don't know much about it myself. They're shooting off this new type rocket, a really big affair, loaded with all sorts of instruments. Some sort of experiment with cosmic rays. The rocket will go up to the outer layers of the Earth's atmosphere, where a clocked mechanism will release a parachute-attached section containing the instruments. This will float back to the surface of the Earth.

"There is one interesting thing about it though. They're also including a live animal with the instruments. A cat I believe. They want to see what effect the cosmic rays will have on a living creature."

The girl turned a shocked face toward him as they walked up the steps to the front door of the house. Trent could see a panel in the center of the door that opened from the inside, and over it, the sign, Doctor is in, please ring.

"But I think that's positively cruel!" Joan Drake said earnestly. "Subjecting an innocent animal to what may be certain death!"

Fred laughed at her concern. "Hold on, now. You should be the last one to take such an attitude. Doesn't medical science experiment on animals to find out about human ailments?"

"That's different," the girl insisted, opening the door and leading the way into a long hall. "Doctors know what they are doing--but this is a sheer waste of life ..."

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Trent let the dog pull him down the hall toward a door at the end which he knew opened on the backyard where the Great Dane was kept.

"Seems to me it's much the same thing," he answered her. "Scientists want to explore the mysteries of space, and the only way to do it is with an animal. Or would you like to make the trip--maybe I can arrange it? Would make a big story, just the one I've been waiting for."

"I believe you would at that!" she mocked, opening the rear door. "Here, give me the leash."

Trent handed over the leash to her and watched as she released the huge dog. Brutus flicked out a long tongue once again and caught the girl's cheek in a wet caress before she straightened.

"Brutus! Now get along with you!"

The dog took a leisurely bound through the door and into the backyard. Trent glanced through the door at the tall fenced-in yard with the large kennel that might well have served as a small garage. He stood beside the girl watching the big animal romp for a few moments, then she shut the door and they turned back down the hall.

"I'll have to go inside now, Fred," she said. "If you want to wait for Gaddon, have a seat. It shouldn't be long."

She started to turn in at a door marked private, when Fred pulled her gently around and before she could stop him, had kissed her.

"I was getting mighty jealous of Brutus. Now I feel better."

"I don't know which of you I prefer," she shot back, then smiled and pulled away from him.

He watched her open the office door and close it after her.

* * * * *

He had lit his second cigarette and gotten halfway through his third magazine on the rack beside the chair when the office door opened again. He heard the pleasant voice of Dr. Stanley Fenwick.

"If every man had a heart as strong as yours, Blair, we wouldn't need half the doctors we have."

Then he heard the deep, gruff voice of Dr. Blair Gaddon half laugh.

"Thanks a lot, Fenwick. You've taken a load off my mind. Goodbye, Miss Drake."

He heard Joan reply and then saw Dr. Fenwick usher the physicist out into the hall.

Trent rose as the two men approached.

"Why, hello, Trent," Dr. Fenwick said.

Trent nodded at the tall, white-coated figure of the famous gland specialist.

"Afternoon, doctor."

Fenwick smiled at him. "Don't tell me you're waiting to see me?"

Fred shook his head. "Not exactly. I was waiting to see Dr. Gaddon though. I was on my way out to the Proving Grounds and I happened to stop by and talk to Miss Drake." He turned to the physicist, a bulky man with firm, hard features, who moved his large body with an almost cat-like grace.

"I hope you don't mind, Dr. Gaddon. Possibly I can give you a lift back out to the Base. I'm covering the
launching for my paper."

Gaddon smiled at him. "But of course I don't mind. And I'll take you up on that offer. It'll save me a trip back to
town to take one of the staff cars."

* * * * *

The words had a friendly note to them, as did the smile on Gaddon's face. And yet, somehow, Fred Trent found
that he did not like this man. It was nothing he could put his finger on, nothing he could rationalize, unless it was the
coldly calculating look in the scientist's eyes.

"That's fine, doctor," Trent replied. "Shall we go?"

He turned and said good-bye to Fenwick and passed a smiling glance at the girl. He could see her blush slightly
as Fenwick caught the glance and laughed. Then they were out of the house and Trent led the way to his car.

Inside, he started the motor and drove away. Beside him, Gaddon lit a cigar and blew a long plume of smoke
through the open window.

"You said you wanted to talk to me, Trent?"

Fred nodded. "That's right, doctor. I'm writing up the rocket experiment for my paper, and I thought maybe you
could give me a few details of interest." He paused for a moment, then asked: "Would it be too personal to ask if
your visit to Dr. Fenwick had anything to do with the coming experiment?"

Gaddon shot a quick glance at him.

"Why do you ask that?"

Fred Trent shrugged. "It was just a thought. I heard Dr. Fenwick talking about your heart, but you look pretty
healthy to me, so I thought maybe it was because Fenwick is a gland specialist and you might be talking to him
about examining the cat after the rocket returns ..."

Gaddon laughed roughly. "A mighty clever reasoning, Trent, but not quite correct. The fact is, I was seeing the
doctor for personal reasons. Just a physical checkup. It had nothing to do with the rocket experiment or the effect of
the cosmic rays on the animal we're including in the experiment."

"It was just a thought, doctor," Trent replied, as he moved the coupe out on the open highway away from
Tucson and toward the Rocket Proving Grounds on the desert flats in the distance.

"So now that we've disposed of that, what else would you like to know?" Gaddon asked him, a peculiar edge to
his voice that Trent did not miss.

"Well, I would like to get a first hand bit of information on just exactly what you plan to prove with this
experiment. If I'm correct, Dr. Mathieson, the head of the project, contends that cosmic rays may be lethal, and this
experiment is to prove his point."

The physicist snorted. "It is no secret that Mathieson and myself disagree violently on that subject."

Trent's eyebrows raised. "Is that so? I wasn't aware of it?"

Gaddon paused, seeing that his words had slipped out too freely. Finally he said, "What I meant to say, Trent, is
that up until now it has not been a public issue of disagreement. And I would prefer to have it remain a private
matter until after the experiment."

"I see," Trent mused. "You have my word that I won't print anything you say without your permission. But just
what is the difference of opinion between you and Mathieson?"

Gaddon took a long pull at his cigar and waited a few moments before replying. It was apparent to Trent that he
was debating continuing the subject with a newspaperman. But Trent had gauged the man correctly. There was a
flair of vanity in Gaddon that dated back to his English ancestry. Trent remembered that Gaddon, quite a figure in
English scientific circles, had created a stir when he had come over to the United States to assist in rocket research at
the Arizona proving grounds. It seemed that Gaddon had not wanted to take a back seat to the famed American
scientist, Mathieson. It had made a few gossip columns in the newspapers before Washington put an official clamp
on the matter.

* * * * *

Now, as Trent waited for the Englishman to reply, he could almost sense the thoughts that were going through
Gaddon's mind. The Englishman was debating whether to take an open stand against the viewpoints of his American
colleague. But Trent felt that the British stubbornness in the man would make him reveal his own theories.
Especially since Trent had already promised not to print anything without Gaddon's permission. That would give
him an opportunity to gloat safely, should his own ideas be proven correct.

"Very well, Trent, I'll take you at your professional word to keep this matter confidential. But if what I contend
is correct, you'll have a big story to tell."

Trent waited expectantly, not wanting to break the Englishman's train of thought.

"The fact is, Trent, that Mathieson is all wrong. To go even further, most of your American scientists don't have
the haziest idea of exactly what the cosmic rays are. We in Britain have made quite exhaustive studies of the
phenomena."

Trent didn't bother to argue with him. He only nodded his head. It would have been silly, he knew, to contradict Gaddon, to tell him that the English didn't know a thing more about the cosmic rays than the American scientists, that American science had made, and was continually making, exhaustive research into that scientific field of study on as great if not more so a scale than Britain could possibly achieve. It was only Gaddon's vanity talking, Trent knew, so he let him put in the barb of ridicule, waiting.

"I was sent over here, as you may know, to aid in the current experiment. To formulate it as a matter of fact. This test is being conducted to determine just what effect cosmic rays will have on a living organism. As I said, Mathieson, and your other scientists are of the opinion that the rays are lethal. That they will destroy life. In effect, that they are death rays.

"But I contend that they are wrong. What would you say if I told you that cosmic rays are the very source of life and energy in the universe?"

Trent whistled judiciously, and noted that Gaddon's face smiled at the apparent surprise Trent evinced.

"You find that a startling statement?"

Trent nodded. "I'd say that it sounded like the beginning of a very interesting theory."

"And you would be right," Gaddon replied, warming to his subject. "It is my contention that the cosmic rays will prove to be the fountain of youth that men have sought through the ages. That they will react on the glands of a living creature and produce immortality.

"Now take your choice. Whose theory would you rather believe? Mathieson's idiotic claims of a death ray, or mine as a source of the utmost benefit to science?"

Trent took a moment before replying. When he did so, he spoke with tact, and also with the feeling that his trip to Fenwick's office had proven very valuable. For there was a story here. A big story.

"I'd say, doctor, that I'd like to believe your theory was correct. But isn't it a little premature to be so definite about it?"

Gaddon snorted. "No more premature than Mathieson's. And I'll tell you something else, Trent. You may not realize it, but you're about to take part in what may be the biggest story of the century. And when it breaks, you'll remember our conversation here. I intend to prove that your American scientists are wrong."

Trent noticed the personal emphasis that Gaddon put in his last statement, but he was drawn away from the conversation as he turned the coupe into the guarded entrance to the proving grounds.

There was a moment of credential flashing to the guards, and a respectful salute to the scientist in the car beside Trent. Then Trent moved his coupe through the entrance and up the cement roadway to the Administration building.

As Gaddon got out of the car he turned to Trent.

"I'll leave you here. The members of the Press will be conducted to the launching site at dusk. I'll see you then. In the meantime, don't forget that you've given your word not to release any of the information I've given you."

Trent nodded and watched him walk away. He followed the Englishman with his eyes, a frown crossing his face. There was something too cocksure about the man. His ridicule of American scientists could be ignored, but the way he spoke about his theory, as if it had already been a proven fact against the ideas of Mathieson....

A faint chill ran up Fred Trent's back. He couldn't explain it. But it was there. An ominous note of foreboding.

He shrugged it off and left his car to walk toward the Administration building.

* * * * *

The remaining hours of the afternoon dragged by in a monotony of idle speculation. Trent listened to the gathered newspapermen discussing the coming experiment at dusk, accompanied them as Dr. Mathieson, the head of the project, conducted them on a tour of the project, to the launching site, and then back to the central building.

The launching site itself had been an impressive sight. The huge rockets, much in appearance like the famed V2 of World War II, but on a much larger scale, were cradled in their launching platforms like some huge monsters about to be unleashed into the unsuspecting heavens.

They had listened as Mathieson explained the various number of instruments that were being included in the first rocket, to record its hurtling trip through the atmosphere to the outermost layers of the Earth's surface.

And they had been told of the other, and to the gathered newspapermen, the most interesting part, the inclusion of a cat in the rocket, in a large oxygen-fed chamber, to study the effects of the cosmic rays on a living creature.

Then back to the central building. Back to wait. And the tension began to mount. For the shadows were lengthening, the sun sinking behind the horizon to the west. The moment was now close at hand.

* * * * *

A stocky figure detached itself from the shadows beside the huge bulk of the laboratory building and slowly edged out into the dusk.

It paused momentarily, to survey the scene. Sharp eyes scanned the looming rockets and their launching
platforms, watchful, alert. They finally settled upon the armed guard who walked a measured distance back and forth in front of the rockets. Then the figure moved forward again, cautiously, purposefully.

The distance from the giant rockets shortened gradually, and then the guard, turning to retrace his steps, saw the approaching figure.

There was a snapping sound as a rifle was brought into position, and a rapping command barked out.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The shadowy figure halted abruptly a short distance away from the guard. And a voice answered.

"Dr. Blair Gaddon."

The guard's rifle snapped into present arms and then back to the soldier's right shoulder.

"Oh, it's you, sir. Is there anything wrong? The launching is set for fifteen minutes from now, isn't it?"

Gaddon walked slowly up to the soldier and the guard could then see his face in the thickening shadows.

"That's right," Gaddon replied. "I'm making a last minute inspection."

The guard nodded. "Dr. Mathieson and the newspapermen will be along any minute, sir?"

Gaddon moved closer to the soldier, and then suddenly his hand came out of his coat pocket and there was a gun in it.

"Drop your rifle, soldier. Quick!"

The guard stared at the scientist in shocked astonishment.

"What is this, sir? A gag?"

Gaddon motioned with his gun.

"It is no gag! Do as I say--or must I shoot?"

* * * * *

There was an ominous note in Gaddon's voice. And a strained quality to it that told the guard the man meant what he said. Very slowly the soldier removed the rifle from his shoulder and dropped it to the ground.

Gaddon motioned with his gun.

"Now step back! Move!"

The guard moved slowly back a pace, and then the Englishman stepped forward and kicked the rifle away from the man. Then he motioned around the rocket.

"Now move over around the side of the number one rocket to the far side of number two."

He watched as the guard turned and began to walk slowly around the huge base of the waiting rocket. He followed the soldier.

"I don't know what this is all about, Dr. Gaddon," the guard protested. "But I can tell you one thing, you're playing with the United States Government right now. When Dr. Mathieson hears about this--"

"When Dr. Mathieson hears about this, soldier, I'll be a long way from here--out at the edge of space itself!"

Gaddon could hear the guard draw in his breath sharply, but the man kept walking around to the far side of the second rocket cradle.

"You can't mean that you're going to go up--"

The soldier's voice broke off uncertainly and Gaddon laughed shortly.

"You are a discerning man, soldier. That is exactly what I intend to do. And I warn you, don't make a false move or I'll shoot. My plans are made and I intend to carry them out!"

They had reached the far side of the second rocket now, away from view of the rest of the buildings, out of sight. Away in the distance the faint outlines of the great wire fence circling the testing grounds could be seen, and beyond that, the twinkling lights of Tucson, already visible in the dusk.

"This is far enough," Gaddon said suddenly.

He watched as the soldier halted. Then Gaddon moved up quickly behind the man. Before the soldier sensed what was about to occur, Gaddon's hand raised over his head and the butt of the weapon in his hand crashed against the back of the man's head.

There was a soft groan in the shadows as the soldier crumpled limply to the ground. In the silence that followed, Gaddon's tense breathing was the only sound. He looked down at the still body of the unconscious man, then he quickly turned and retraced his footsteps back the way he had come.

When he had reached the far side of the first rocket, he stopped before the metal steps of the cradle leading up to the closed door of the rocket. He looked quickly about him, making sure that nobody was in close proximity, then he threw his gun under the rocket beside the rifle of the soldier, and ran up the steps.

A cool breeze sprang up in the western night and whispered softly around Gaddon as he fumbled for a moment with a switch set in the smooth side of the rocket beside the sealed door.

There was a click, finally, and the door slid open.

Gaddon took a last look about him and then quietly slipped through the opening. A moment later there was the
Inside the rocket, Gaddon lit a small pocket flash and looked around him. A soft sound struck his ears. The meowing sound of a cat. He turned the flash on the startled animal and a low laughter crept from his throat.

He moved through the large instrument chamber then and sat on the floor beside the cat.

Then the flash went out and his laughter came again ...

"All right, gentlemen, the time has come. In a few minutes an automatic control, synchronized with controls in the rocket will be set off in the main laboratory building. If we want to watch the launching we'll have to hurry."

Fred Trent listened to the voice of Mathieson, and saw the famed American scientist start out of the central lobby toward the launching site. The gathered newspapermen followed, their voices filled with excitement now that the moment had come.

Trent followed along with them, but felt a peculiar tenseness within him. He had been watching for Gaddon to make his appearance. But as yet the Englishman had not showed up. Was it possible that he wasn't going to watch the rocket launching? As Trent followed the others out into the gathering night, he frowned to himself. It was certainly strange. And entirely unlike the blustering manner Gaddon had displayed on the drive back from Tucson. Or had the man suddenly realized that he had made a fool of himself and was taking this easy way out?

But that too didn't seem natural. And Trent found himself edging forward through the ranks of the newsmen, until he had reached the side of Mathieson.

The scientist was talking to one of the journalists as they rounded the corner of the Administration building. Now the rockets were in sight, standing tall and immense in the shadows.

Fred turned to Mathieson.

"Dr. Mathieson, isn't Dr. Gaddon going to be here for the launching?"

"Yes, that is strange ..." Then he laughed. "I suppose Gaddon is in the laboratory supervising the firing controls. Well, if he wants to miss the show, that's his fault. He knows the schedule."

Trent accepted the scientist's words without replying. But he still wasn't satisfied. What was it that Gaddon had said in the car about the biggest story of the year? What had the man meant? Question after question arose in Trent's mind as he stood there, and always the queer feeling inside him grew in intensity. He could not place his finger on it, but somehow, he knew that something was wrong.

But then his suspicions were put aside for the moment as he heard Mathieson say:

"All right, gentlemen, the time is nearly here. In precisely one minute the rocket will be fired."

The statement was made with a quiet eagerness, and then suddenly the gathered witnesses grew silent.

Trent's eyes, along with the others, fastened on the looming bulk of the waiting rocket.

And the seconds ticked off in Fred's mind.

As he counted them, he thought that it seemed impossible that within a very few moments that gigantic hulk of smooth, tapered metal would dislodge itself from the cradle it rested in with a burst of roaring flame. That in another few seconds it would shoot into the blackened sky, and in a few short minutes would reach unbelievable heights in the heavens, to the edge of space itself before the automatic controls released the instrument section to be returned safely to earth.

And the seconds passed.

"Time!"

Fred heard the voice of Mathieson rap the word out sharply.

And then there was a roar of sound from the cradled rocket.

A spear of flame shot from its base, exploding the night into a brilliant display of pyrotechnics.

The roaring grew louder as the tremendous power of the now unleashed rockets took hold of the night air. Fred watched as the flames grew white-hot bright, and then he saw the gigantic rocket shudder in its cradle.

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The shudder grew into a spasm of movement, and then slowly, but steadily growing faster, the rocket lifted from its cradle.

Fred's eyes were fastened on the rocket now, a feeling of awe sweeping through him. He suddenly realized how puny man was against the forces man could unleash. Forces that here were being utilized to scientific ends, but forces that upon a moment's notice, could in turn be unleashed upon the rest of humanity in a burning, devastating terror of death.

And as the thought flitted across his mind, he saw the rocket gather speed as it left its cradle. It was now rising in a swift, sure arc, lashing into the dark sky like a fury.
And then the terrible speed of the rocket took hold against the forces of gravity and it shot into the heavens, its roaring becoming a fading hiss of sound, the brilliant flash of flame from its exploding tubes, a receding beacon of light that gradually faded to a pinpoint far over their heads.

After the terrific thunder of sound that had accompanied the launching of the rocket, the sudden silence now was almost palpable. The gathered witnesses stood mutely, awe still in their eyes, their ears still ringing with the sound of the takeoff.

Finally the voice of Mathieson broke the quiet night air.
"Well, gentlemen, that's it. Tomorrow morning we'll scout the returned section. It should land somewhere in the open country to the south. We've computed that pretty carefully. I guess that's about all for—"

His voice broke off suddenly and Fred Trent heard what must have distracted the scientist.
A man was shouting from the vicinity of the second rocket, and as they looked, a dim figure could be seen staggering away from the side of the other rocket, coming slowly toward them.
"Good Lord!" Mathieson breathed. "What's that man doing out there? He could have been killed!"

Then suddenly they saw the staggering figure stumble on the ground.
And then Trent and the others were racing across the ground to the side of the fallen man.
When they reached him, Mathieson came forward and knelt beside the figure.
"Why, it's one of the guards!" he said in shocked surprise.

And it was then that the strange feeling of foreboding hit Fred again. As he knelt beside the groaning guard, it swept over him in a chilling wave. He lifted the man's head from the ground and the guard opened his eyes. He recognized the face of Mathieson as the scientist looked anxiously in his direction.
"Good heavens, man, what happened? You were ordered to leave five minutes before launching time!"
The guard's mouth opened as he struggled to a sitting position. The man's hand reached up and touched the back of his head painfully.
"Sir—Gaddon—Dr. Gaddon attacked me..."
There was a momentary stunned silence as the soldier's words sunk in on the gathered men.
"What?" Mathieson's voice was incredulous.
And as Trent watched the soldier nod his head, the suspicion he had felt suddenly overwhelmed him in a grim realization. Even as the soldier blurted out pain-filled words, Trent knew somehow what he was going to say.
"Gaddon—he pulled a gun on me... He forced me to the far side of number two—he said he was going up in the rocket—he said he had plans—then he hit me with the gun... I came to when the rocket went off—I was away from the blasts, luckily..."

Then the soldier was standing on his feet again, swaying as he fought to clear his fogged senses.
But Trent was no longer aware of the soldier. And he saw that Mathieson was no longer looking at the guard. For a brief instant their eyes met, and Trent saw a stunned look in the scientist's, then Fred's gaze swept up into the night. Up into the darkened sky where, miles above them, the hurtling rocket was even now reaching the apex of its flight.

Up where a man rode on a perilous trip into the unknown.

Gaddon hunched in the darkness of the rocket, waiting. He had counted the remaining minutes off, one by one. And he knew that finally the moment was at hand.

And now that the moment was close to completion, he felt a glowing sense of triumph within him. He would now show those fools, and especially Mathieson. He would prove conclusively that cosmic rays were what he had said they were—a source of the energy of life, a fountain from which youth and vitality would pour, making his body immortal. He would go down in history as one of the greats of science. A man who had risked his life to prove his theory. A man who would be the first to achieve the goal of the ages, the dream of the philosophers, eternal life.
The triumph would be his. All his!

And the rocket tubes exploded into sound.
Gaddon tensed in the darkness, gripping the safety straps he had attached to himself. Beside him he felt the cat let out a frightened mewing sound as the roar of the exploding rocket power grew. He felt the furry body rubbing against his side, seeking sanctuary against this dread sound.
And then the rocket trembled with sudden movement.
It was slow at first, but then it grew faster, and Gaddon felt a faint intensity of fear in his temples at the shuddering power of that movement.
And then he felt the blood draining from his head, making him faint with dizziness as the rocket accelerated
suddenly into a terrible burst of speed.

He could feel it moving swiftly through the atmosphere now, feel the tortured rush of air that whipped against
the sides of the projectile in a moaning dirge that mingled with the roar of the exploding rocket fuel.

And as the seconds passed, he became accustomed somewhat to the increasing velocity of the projectile, and
the dizziness passed from his head. Then he became aware of the trembling body of the cat beside him and a soft
laughter rose in his throat.

But it died stillborn as the roar of the rockets grew to a thundering hiss now in his ears.

And he felt the cool sweetness of the automatically released oxygen fill the chamber about him and he drank it
into his lungs hungrily.

With each second now, he knew the projectile was racing higher into the rarefied atmosphere, heading steadily
out to where the air of earth would be almost non-existent.

And a grim smile crossed his face in the darkness, for he knew that shortly the rocket would enter the outermost
layers and the cosmic rays would play with all their energies upon the projectile.

And he tensed suddenly.

There was a glow that sprang into being in the chamber about him.

It was dim at first. But it grew steadily in intensity around him, revealing the interior of the chamber in its
weird light.

An exultation swept through him then. He knew they had entered the field of the cosmic rays, and that the
manifestation of light he saw was a result of those forces of nature.

Beside him the cat mewed plaintively in fear and huddled closer against Gaddon's body. His eyes watched the
tiny creature for a moment and then swept around the large chamber at the massed instrument panels that were
recording every minute fraction of a second of the flight.

And the glow grew.

And suddenly the hissing of the exploding rocket fuel began to diminish in volume. The apex of the flight was
nearly at hand then.

And the glow around Gaddon began to color. From a weird phosphorescent whiteness it changed to a dull but
intense yellow. And with the change, a strange feeling crept through his body.

* * * * *

It tugged at him with invisible hands. It played upon his every nerve, his every fiber, the innermost feelings of
his sensibility. It grew stronger, this alien probing within him, grew as the glow pulsed in the chamber around him.

And suddenly, instead of a fierce feeling of triumph, a sense of dread swept through him. He fought at the
gripping sensations within him, tried to dispel them, to no avail. They grew stronger, like invisible hands that were
changing the very essence of life inside him.

And as the thought passed through his suddenly tortured mind, he realized that was exactly what was taking
place. A change. A change beyond his comprehension, beyond the understanding of any man. Beyond--

And the whining fearful mew of the cat beside him changed. It tensed against his body, and the whine in its
animal throat became an irate hiss. He looked down and saw the hackles rising on the back of the cat, saw the
creature looking up at him now, not with wide frightened eyes of appeal, but with a ferocity of wildness that brought
a chill to his inner being.

And the glow grew around him, brilliant yellow in texture now. And with the increasing brilliance of the light,
the feeling of change grew within him.

It was stronger than he now. It held his every heartbeat in its pulsing grip. It throbbed in his temples, ached to
the ends of his toes, set his body aflame with it.

And the cat suddenly lunged against him, its sharpened claws biting through his garments and into his flesh.
His hands reached down in a quick movement and gripped the body of the cat. He tore the raking claws away
from his body and held the cat in the air beside him.

The creature writhed in his grasp, fighting madly to escape. And as his grip tightened on the animal, the eyes of
the cat suddenly locked with his.

He felt the forces within him reach a crescendo at that moment. And his body was frozen immobile, his eyes
locked on the cat's eyes, burning into the animal, the animal burning into him. Burning and burning ... It could only have been a matter of seconds, he knew. But they were seconds that stretched into the farthestmost
reaches of eternity. Seconds that lived a million years and passed in another fleeting instant.

And then he could move again.

And he felt strange as he moved. It was as if he was another person, as if the body he moved was alien to him,
as if it had never belonged to him, to any man, to any thing.

And his eyes tore away from the now dulled expression in the cat's eyes. He did not find it strange that this was
so. He knew in some inner sense that the mighty life force in him had quelled the cat. Had stilled the fighting in its feline eyes.

And he saw his hands clutching the body of the cat.

He stared at them for a long disbelieving moment. For they were not the hands he had known. They were not the hands of Blair Gaddon. They were not the hands of any man. They were long and tapered and claw-like. There was dark fuzzy fur around them, fur that was cat-like.

Deep within him a fear struggled upward through his mind. A cold dread that forced his lips to move, to utter a gasp of the terror he felt.

And the sound left his lips.

It left his lips and echoed terribly in his ears. A harsh sound. A mewing sound. A cat sound ...

The creature in his grasp struggled feebly then. It was a small movement, a movement without vitality, almost without life. And as the creature moved, a sense of rage welled up inside him. A rage that he could not control, an anger that he wanted to unleash to its fullest. And as it took possession of him, the human part of his mind shrieked and forced words from his lips.

"You fiend! You fiend of hell!"

And his fingers crept up to the neck of the cat and closed in a mighty grip. He felt the animal give a single desperate effort in his grasp, but his grip tightened and he saw the mouth of the creature open wide and heard a faint hissing gasp as its tongue stuck far out and its eyes bulged in a last moment of life.

Then the animal lay limp in his claw-like hands and he dropped it to the floor of the rocket chamber, a growl of frustration leaving his lips.

He stared at the cat's body for a moment, then his fingers stole up and touched his face. He felt the hairy coarseness of it, the furry tingle of his once smooth skin. And he screamed into the now fading glow that he knew was the energy of the cosmic rays.

"No! No! It can't be true! I haven't changed like this! I--I--meowrr ..."

Around him the thunder of the rocket fuel suddenly vanished into silence, and then the rocket gave a lurch.

Deep within his mind he knew that the instrument section had been released from the main body of the projectile, and even now he knew the sealed chamber was falling back toward the earth, back toward the atmosphere where the parachute would take hold and drift the chamber safely down to the Arizona soil.

And a dread closed over him in that moment. Back to the men. Back to the things of men. Back he must go, a mewing thing that was not a man. A thing that he felt was taking hold of him, driving the last vestige of human instinct from him.

He fought it. He fought it mewing on the floor of the rocket chamber.

* * * * *

"He must have gone mad!"

Fred Trent pulled his gaze from the sky and looked with stunned eyes at the figure of Dr. Mathieson standing beside him. The scientist was trembling with an inner feeling, and his head was shaking in disbelief.

"Gaddon! The man is going to his death! It's insane!"

Again Mathieson's voice broke the silence in the huddled group of men. Then the newspapermen came to life and excited talk became a jabber of words around them. Trent took the arm of Mathieson and turned him. He tried to lead the scientist away from the newspapermen but one of them stepped forward and grabbed his arm.

"But why did he do it, doctor? The man must have had a reason!"

Mathieson shook his head numbly.

"I--I don't know, unless ..." his voice trailed off for a moment and then he spoke again. "Unless he really believed what he said ..."

"What did he say, doctor?" the newsmen asked.

There was a puzzled note to Mathieson's voice as he answered.

"He disagreed with me on the supposed effects of the cosmic rays. It has been my contention that they are of lethal effect, and Gaddon maintained that I was wrong. He kept insisting that they were a source of life energy. That was why we decided to experiment with an animal--to see what effect the rays would have on a living creature ...

"But this! I never dreamed of such a possibility--to prove his point he signed his own death warrant!"

"That's a story, doctor, a real story!"

Trent heard the newsmen exclaim excitedly. And then it came to him that the real story was as yet untold. The real story that had been unfolded in his car earlier that day.

Fred moved suddenly away from the clamor of the newsmen around the scientist. He knew what he had to do.

He hurried across the ground to his waiting coupe outside the Administration building. Then he got behind the wheel and started the motor.
He drove to the gate and waited until the guard passed him through, then he turned up the road toward Tucson. As he drove he felt an odd tenseness sweep through him. For he was thinking of what Gaddon had said on the drive up to the Proving Grounds. He was remembering the man’s words on the cosmic rays and the secret of eternal life they held. And Fred Trent knew that this was the biggest story. The story that he alone held. It was the big break that he had been waiting for. It would be his exclusive. The inside, personal story of a man who had died to prove his theory. Told as Gaddon himself had related it. With all the vanity of the man, all the pompous assurance he had shown. It would make the headlines and feature sections all over the country. The story of a man who had flown to his death in quest of immortality.

And then Trent’s thoughts grew sober suddenly. But was he going to his death? Could he be sure that Mathieson was right? That Gaddon was suffering from some streak of insanity that had manifested itself in this final venture of madness? Or could it be that Gaddon might be right, that ...

Trent set his lips and sighed. No, that couldn’t be true. It was beyond the comprehension of man.

What mattered now was the story. The story that would put his name in a thousand papers all over the country. And he thought in that moment of Joan Drake. A warm smile pulled at his lips as he thought of her. This would force her to quit her job now and marry him. The one condition she had made--he had finally overcome.

He thought of the date he was supposed to have with her that evening. It would have to be postponed until later.

The story came first. And then ...

He drove his car swiftly through the outskirts of the city and into the main part of town. Then he pulled up before the offices of the Tucson Star and left his car at the curb.

* * * * *

He entered the building, took the elevator to his floor and walked into the city room. The clatter of typewriters met his ears and the sound was sweet to him in that moment.

He crossed swiftly to his desk and sat down. Then he motioned to a copy boy. The boy came up to his desk.

"Jerry, tell the chief to hold up the form on page one. I’ve got a special--an accident out at the Proving Grounds. Headline copy."

The youth hurried away toward the office of the City Editor, and Fred picked up his phone and dialed a number. He waited a moment and then the voice of Joan Drake came across the wire.

"Dr. Fenwick’s office."

"Joan, this is Fred." The girl’s voice laughed across the wire. "Don’t tell me you’re planning to break our date? Just when I get all dressed up."

A smile crossed Trent’s lips. "You’re almost psychic, honey. Fact is, I was calling to tell you I’ll be a little late."

There was a pause and when the girl spoke again there was an injured note in her voice.

"Well, that’s a fine thing. I wait here deliberately after hours for you to pick me up and now you tell me you’ll be late! Just what’s so more important than me right now?"

"I haven’t got time to tell you now, Joan, but believe me, I’ve got the break of the year. A story that will rock the front pages across the country. I’ll tell you all about it later. You can wait at Fenwick’s place. He won’t mind, will he?"

He could hear the girl sniff on the other end of the wire.

"I don’t suppose he will, but I don’t think I can say the same for myself."

"That’s a good girl," Trent laughed. "Just wait for me. It may be an hour or so--"

"An hour or so! What are you writing, the great American novel?"

He looked up and saw the frowning face of the City Editor approaching his desk. He spoke hurriedly.

"I’ve got to sign off now. The boss is coming up. I’ll see you later. Give my regards to Brutus."

He replaced the phone as the editor reached his desk.

"What’s all this about a remake on the front page, Trent?"

Fred nodded. "That’s right, chief. The biggest story since the atom bomb. Listen!"

He gave a short account of what had happened, and then added the personal details of his talk with Gaddon. He saw the eyes of the editor widen as he went on, and by the time he had finished, there was a look of excitement on the editor’s face.

"Get to that story, Trent. Write it hot, and write it fast. I’ll hold the first form and tear down the front page. Stress the human interest angle. Play it up big. We’ll hit the news wires with it after we go to press."

Then a smile crossed the editor’s face. "And you’ll get a by-line on this, Trent, that ought to put you in for some big money. Nice work."

Then he turned on his heel and was hurrying across the city room toward his glassed-in office, hollering for a copy boy as he went.
Trent turned back to his desk and slipped a sheet of paper into his typewriter. There was a tenseness around his eyes as he brought his fingers down on the keys. For a moment the old questions rose again in his mind. Was Gaddon right? Could it be possible that ... Then he forgot everything but the story. And his fingers clicked against the keys, putting it down on paper.

* * * * *

The rocket chamber swayed gently through the night air, whistling its way slowly downward, moving more slowly as the great parachute above it caught in the rapidly thickening density of the cabin's atmosphere.

Inside it, the thing that had been Gaddon, the thing that was no longer a man, sat on the floor of the chamber, idly toying with the dead body of the cat.

Strange thoughts coursed through the mind inside its head. Half of the mind that belonged to Gaddon, and half of the mind that was an alien thing, a creature unnamed.

There was a thought of killing and the thought was good. The claw-like hands played with the cat's dead body, fondling it idly, wishing it were still alive so that it might die again.

And the other part of its mind, the part that still knew it was Gaddon, rebelled against the thought. Tried to drive it away. Tried to move that alien intelligence into the rear of his consciousness.

A growl left his lips as he struggled with it. And then a whimpering sound.

For now the alien thought of killing and the joy it had experienced as the cat died scant moments before, was replaced by another thought. A thought of loneliness.

It was a weird feeling, an utter loneliness that came from the great void beyond man's planet. It cried out in silent protest for it knew it was alone in this world of men.

And it knew it would remain alone, friendless. For what manner of men such as the other part of its mind showed would react in a friendly fashion? Where would be their common meeting ground? There could only be one, it knew. And that one was fear. Fear and the hate that went with it.

A growl left its lips again, and Gaddon's thoughts tried to force their way through. Tried and failed again.

But was it necessary to want companionship? It thought about that for a moment. And then the alien beast thoughts grew sharper, clearer. It knew suddenly that it did not want man's compassion. It knew that there was only one driving thought in it. Hate. Hate that would inspire fear. Fear that would freeze its victim into terror. And terror that would be replaced by death. And then it would be happy again. Happy to sit and fondle the thing that had been alive. And it knew something else. It knew that a hunger would have to be satisfied. A hunger that called for flesh.

Deep, primeval thoughts raced through it then. Thoughts that were spawned in the ancient jungles of a new and steaming world. A world where great cats roamed, where screams of cat-rage split the air as tawny bodies arced in lightning leaps to land on the trembling bodies of their victims. It was a satisfying thought. A thought that spanned the ages of Earth, a sense that was inherent in all cat minds through the ages.

And as the thought raced through that portion of its mind, the part that was Gaddon struggled to fight it back. For it realized with a sickness that spread horror through it that the thought was part of the animal existence that had been created in him. Part of the monster that lay by instinct in all feline creatures. And Gaddon knew that the dead creature at his feet, the limp and twisted body of the cat, had died long before his hands had crushed it in their mighty grip. For the essence of that life, that animal existence, had been merged with him, fused by a mighty source from outer space.

* * * * *

And as he struggled with the thought, fought to regain the balance of control of the strange body that was now his, the rocket chamber swayed in a gust of wind from without. And as he clutched the sides of the chamber with his strong claw-like hands, the chamber gave a bounding lurch as it struck the ground a glancing blow.

There was a grating sound as the metal chamber gouged into the earth, sank its weight upon the Arizona soil. And the thing was thrown violently against the side of the chamber.

Then there was quiet again.

Gaddon's mind fought to the fore, took control of that feline man-shape that was his, struggled to its feet and moved in a lithe bound to the opposite side of the chamber. A clawed hand reached up where Gaddon knew the release mechanism of the door lay, and pressed it.

The door slid back with a sliding sound and the cool night air rushed in upon it.

Gaddon moved his cat-body through the opening and bounded to the ground in a lithe, powerful movement. He felt new muscles react as he landed on the ground, and knew that there was a great strength in them. Strength that was waiting to be used.

And he felt the other thoughts starting to move forward in his mind again and he forced them back. He knew he must keep control of that mind. For there was something that he must do.

He thought desperately about it. And the pattern became clearer in his mind.
The cosmic rays. The reaction in his body. He had sought immortality in the door to outer space and had found a monster waiting for him. A force that had changed his glands, grown the shaggy fur on his body. Glands that had warped his mind. Opened an age-old cunning of feline thought.

Glands.
Gaddon's thoughts whipped the word. Held it. Knew it must be the answer. And then it found a prayer of hope. And a name that went with that thought.

"Fenwick! I've got to reach Fenwick before it's too late. Before it's too late!"
His voice came hoarsely, strangely formed. And he looked wildly about him. He saw, off in the distance, a glowing of lights in the night. And he knew somehow that it was the city of Tucson.
And in that city, at its very edge, was a house he must reach.
He stumbled away into the darkness, feeling his limbs move rapidly then, smoothly, covering the ground in great leaping strides.
And though Gaddon's thoughts kept the balance of control, deep inside his mind, the monster growled with a cunning laughter ...

Fred Trent pulled the last sheet of paper from his typewriter and leaned back in his chair exhausted. That was it, the end of the story. He waved his hand at a copy boy and the boy ran up to take the final page. Each sheet had been taken like that, to be immediately set in the composing room. Now it was finished, the story of the year.

And as Trent slowly lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, he knew that he had done a good job on the story. And a smile crossed his face as he thought of it. His future was assured now. There could be no more stopgaps, no more delays in his plans to marry Joan and settle down. And the girl would have to agree. For the first time in many months, Fred felt that his troubles were over with. And the feeling was nice. It spread through him and he was content.

He glanced at his wrist watch and frowned. The story had taken longer than he had anticipated. It was nearly eleven. Some of the enthusiasm ran out of him as he thought of Joan waiting for him at Fenwick's. He could imagine how angry she must be by now.

He got up quickly from his desk and reached for his hat. As he started to walk away, the phone on his desk rang.
He stepped back and picked up the receiver.
"Trent speaking."
"Fred!"
Trent heard his name uttered in terror across the wire and he felt a chill run through him as he recognized the voice. It was Joan Drake.
"Joan, what's wrong?" he asked anxiously.
"Fred! Come quickly! Bring help before it's too late--he'll kill us!"
"Joan! For God's sake, calm down! Now what's the matter?" His voice held a tenseness in it as he spoke.
"It's Gaddon, Fred! Only it isn't Gaddon--it's a monster! He'll kill us!"
"Gaddon?" Trent's voice spoke incredulously. "But that's impossible--"
"Oh, Fred, hurry-- I--oh--no--no! Keep away--"
He heard the girl scream over the phone then. And he heard something else. A growling sound. A sound of animal noise unlike any other sound he had ever heard. And then as he shouted into the phone: "Joan! Joan!" the line went dead.

He stood for a moment, staring stupidly at the receiver in his hand. Then he slammed it back on its cradle and turned. He nearly knocked over the copy boy who hollered at him.
"Hey, Trent, the boss wants you in his office!"
But he swept by the boy unheeding. He didn't wait for the elevator. He took the stairs in leaping bounds, and then he was on the main floor of the building and out on the street.
He slammed the door of his car shut and started the motor. His hands trembled as he meshed the gears and shot the coupe away from the curb. Then he was moving swiftly through the traffic.
As he turned down the street where Fenwick's office was, Fred Trent's mind was a whirl of confused thought.
There was fear there. Fear and dread. And there was puzzlement too. A puzzlement that made his brain spin. Joan had spoken with terror in her voice. Terror that had said somebody was going to kill. And Joan was not a girl to be easily frightened. And she had mentioned Gaddon's name. Gaddon, the man who had shot into the heavens in an experimental rocket. Gaddon, who was supposed to be dead.

* * * * *

He felt now that same feeling that had crept through him after the launching. The feeling that had whispered in
his mind that maybe Gaddon had been right after all. That maybe he wouldn't die. That maybe ... And now the dread swept him. For he thought of the sound he had heard over the phone. The last sound before the line went dead. The sound of an animal growling in wrath. And he remembered the girl's scream about a monster.

A cold sweat was on his forehead as he pulled the coupe into the curb in front of the Fenwick house. He switched off the motor and closed the car door after him.

Then he was hurrying up the walk to the front door, his eyes taking in the house in a swift glance, noting that the lights were lit in the consultation room. Lights that slivered out from the closed venetian blinds.

He stood then on the front porch, his hand closing over the knob of the door.

It was locked.

He pressed the bell then and heard its clarion sound inside the house. But other than that there was nothing to be heard. A deep, ominous silence that somehow brought a feeling of panic to him. Was he too late?

And then suddenly the panel in the front of the door opened and a face peered out at him.

Fred Trent felt the blood drain from his lips. A paralysis seemed to grip his body at what he saw framed in the opening.

For it was not the face of a human being. And yet, it was not the face of an animal. It was a horrible, twisted, cat-like visage that peered out at him, furred and ugly, with bared teeth and glowing, feline eyes.

And as he looked, a sound came from the twisted lips. It was the same sound he had heard over the telephone. The sound of a growling rage.

And as the sound hit his ears, a terrible realization swept over him. For his eyes, riveted on that monstrous countenance, had registered an impossible fact upon his mind.

As twisted as it was, as horribly changed into an animal grimace, it was the face of someone he knew--the English scientist, Blair Gaddon!

And then suddenly the face vanished from the opening. And Fred Trent felt his paralysis leave him. He knew now that he should never have come alone. That he should have called the police first. That he--

The door swung open then and Trent found himself facing the thing that had been Gaddon.

He took a backward step and started to turn and run for his car and help, but he was too slow.

An arm shot out and a claw-like hand suddenly gripped his shoulder in a swift, steel-like movement. He felt himself being pulled forward and into the house, as another growl snarled from the lips of the creature.

Trent tried to break the grip of that vise-like hand. He tried to smash his fist into the ugly visage of a face that confronted him. But he was like a child in that grip. And like a child, he was hurled across the hall, and he heard the door slam shut behind him.

As he got slowly to his feet and turned to face the creature, he heard a sobbing sound from the open door of the consultation room. It was the voice of Joan Drake.

And then the monster had reached him and the clawed hand reached out and spun him through the doorway, into the consultation room. And he heard a growling voice utter harshly: "You will regret this interference, Trent!"

And he knew that it was the voice of Blair Gaddon. And yet he also knew that it was not the same voice. It was changed. It had a bestial quality to it.

Then Trent looked around him. He saw Joan Drake, huddled in a corner of the room, beside Dr. Stanley Fenwick. The specialist was sitting in a chair, holding his right hand to his mouth. Fred could see blood oozing from a gash in the surgeon's lips.

* * * * *

And then he heard another sound. A sound from without the house, coming from the rear. It was the baying of Brutus. The big dog must have sensed the presence of the monster. And it was protesting in its animal voice, a mournful dirge.

Then his attention was drawn once again to the animal body of Blair Gaddon. And now that the first shock had left him, Trent stared at the man. He heard the girl sob.

"Fred! I told you to bring help--"

"Be quiet!" the voice of Gaddon issued from the twisted lips. And the girl's sob stifled itself in a look of dread.

Then the face that had been Gaddon turned to Trent. There was a twisted leer to it, and Fred sensed that there was a struggle going on in that warped mind.

"You are Gaddon? The Blair Gaddon who went up with the experimental rocket?" Trent's voice came incredulously.

The face of the creature twisted in a grimace of acknowledgment.

"Yes, Trent. I am Blair Gaddon. I am not a pretty sight to look at, am I?" Words left the twisted lips, and there was a bestial pain in them.

"But--you're supposed to be dead! Mathieson--"
A strange sound of irony came from Gaddon.
"Mathieson was right about the cosmic rays--I know that now. Look at me! You see what has happened to me? I sought immortality through the life energy of space--and look at me!"

Horror reflected in Fred's eyes in that moment. For he felt the pained terror in the voice of the animal shape before him. And he saw the claw-like hands clench spasmodically.
"My glands!" the voice screamed. "The cosmic rays reacted on them--fed the essence of the cat into them--changed me into this monstrous being!"

Trent stared at the rage-filled face. Felt the emotion that was sweeping through the creature. Felt a sudden compassion that was erased by the bestial look that came into the monster's eyes.

And then it turned toward the chair where Fenwick sat. The doctor was looking at the creature, his eyes wide and terrified.

"But what do you expect me to do for you, Gaddon? Why do you stand here threatening--" Fenwick's voice came hoarsely.

"Why? You fool! Because there is so little time! I am changing! Even now my human instincts are nearly gone!... You're a gland specialist! There is something you can do--stop this change--stop it!"

Fenwick shook his head slowly. "You're raving like a madman, Gaddon. I'm not a God--do you think I can change something that is beyond human understanding? If you'll only let me call in the authorities ..."

A growl of rage left Gaddon's animal lips. "Authorities! So you can have me put in cage like a wild beast? So you and your medical experts can stand and watch me as you would a freak? You're a fool! You'll help me now! You'll do something--before it's too late! Do you hear me?"

The creature advanced slowly upon the doctor, and the girl backed away to the far wall, fear mirrored in her eyes.

Then Fred Trent stepped forward, his voice tense.
"Hold on, Gaddon--of course the doctor will help you--won't you, Fenwick?"

There was an urgent emphasis in Trent's last words, and his eyes caught those of the surgeon's, and held them in a meaningful look. He couldn't say what he wanted to, but the message in his eyes was imparted to Fenwick, and the doctor suddenly nodded.

"Yes--yes, of course ... But you'll have to remain quiet, Gaddon, and be patient a moment...."

The creature stopped its advance upon Fenwick then. And a growl rumbled in Gaddon's animal throat. Then Fred watched as the doctor stepped swiftly to a table with instruments and hurriedly began to prepare a hypodermic.

"I'll give you a special extract injection to start...." Fenwick explained as he worked.
And Trent knew that the doctor was preparing an injection that would subdue the monster. That would enable them to call the police....

And the eyes of Gaddon watched the fingers of the surgeon prepare the hypodermic. And for a single moment the human part of Gaddon's monster mind relaxed its tenacious hold.

* * * * *

There was a rumble of raging thought deep within his twisted brain. It swept up, gripped the human element, and enveloped it. A hoarse mewing sound left the twisted lips as the mind became a single, bestial thing.

And now it thought with a viciousness. It knew now that it was finally in control. That the full change had been completed. And it knew suddenly what it wanted.

Its animal eyes stared at the three humans. And it felt a hatred for the men who did not understand it. And it felt a desire for the woman who feared it. A desire that crept out of the primeval jungles. That swept through it to find one of its kind. And there was the vague instinct that was Gaddon, who told it how to fulfill that desire. Gaddon, who knew where the secret lay.

And then there was the driving urge that swept up from the animal ages. The urge to kill, to destroy what was hated. And the eyes of the monster fastened on the figure of Fenwick as the doctor turned from the table, the hypodermic in his hand.

"All right, Gaddon ..."

The voice of Fenwick trailed off. And Fred Trent stared at the face of the monster. What he saw there brought a chill to his being. And he heard the girl gasp from the far corner of the room, as her eyes too saw the change that had spread over the face of the creature.

For there was no longer any vestige of human recognition in that face. There was no longer any trace of the man who had been Gaddon. There was only the monster now. The twisted, leering lips of an animal mind.

A harsh growl left those lips then and the creature moved forward toward the surgeon.

Trent knew what was happening, and he knew what he must do. There was death on that bestial face. Death
that was reaching out ...

He heard the dim baying of the Great Dane from the rear of the house as he leaped forward.

Then his fist lashed out and caught the animal face in a lashing blow. His knuckles felt numb as he screamed:
"The hypodermic--doctor--quick!"

Then the creature turned on him and a long arm shot out. Trent felt a claw rake across his face and felt the burning bite of that claw sink into his flesh. Then, as he tried to dodge away from the beast and bring his fist up again, the monster leaped at him and Trent felt a powerful blow crash against his chin.

He spun back, falling to the floor, his head hitting the edge of an examining table. His senses reeled and he felt the blood running down his cheek, a warm, sticky stream that dripped to the floor.

He fought to keep his consciousness as he saw the beast turn away from him, satisfied that he was out of the way. Then he saw it leap at the stunned figure of Fenwick.

He heard the girl scream in terror and he saw Fenwick's arm come up with the hypodermic. He saw the doctor try to bring the needle down in a jab, but the monster's arm swept the needle aside and then a claw-like hand gripped Fenwick's throat.

There was a gasp of terror from Fenwick's lips as those fingers closed around his neck. Then the hypodermic fell from his nerveless hand and he fought to break away.

A deep rumbling growl spat from the lips of the monster as it closed with the struggling figure of Fenwick. Then the claws that were its hands raked the surgeon's throat in a feline rage.

Trent watched with numbed eyes, fighting back the wave of blackness that threatened to overcome him, and he saw the figure of Fenwick suddenly go limp in the grip of the monster.

He saw a spurt of blood burst from the man's torn throat, and then the creature dropped the limp body.

It fell to the floor, and a wave of red washed across the floor from the mangled throat. The monster stood over the lifeless body, a triumphant sound issuing from its twisted lips.

Then it turned toward the girl.

Trent tried to move. He tried to push back the weakness that numbed his body. But he couldn't. His head swam with the pain of the blow he had received, and he could only watch through half-closed eyes as the monster reached out for the girl.

Joan Drake screamed once as the long arms reached out for her. Then her voice ended abruptly as she fell to the floor in a faint.

The monster stood over her for a moment, then it reached down and picked up her body in its blood splattered-arms.

It turned for a moment, holding the girl, and shot a hate-filled glance at Trent's limp figure.

Then it moved swiftly into the room and out into the hall.

And the baying of the Great Dane sounded angrily in Fred Trent's ears ...

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With a superhuman effort Fred Trent forced the numbness from his body and moved slowly to his feet. A horror gripped him that brought a new strength to his body, flooded it.

He stepped over the body of Fenwick, forcing his eyes away from the grisly sight of it as he dashed to the hallway.

"Joan--Joan!"

The girl's name came hoarsely from his lips as he ran into the hall and stared at the open door of the house. He ran to the door and out into the night.

His eyes stared wildly into the darkness, searching the street. But he saw nothing but his parked car at the curb.

The monster had vanished. And with him, the unconscious girl.

A hopeless despair welled up inside Trent at that moment. For he knew he could never hope to find the creature now. And by the time help came it would be too late. They would find Joan's mangled body ...

The baying of the Great Dane rang in his ears then. The huge dog's howls of rage thundered in his ears and he heard the hound crash its great body against the closed door at the end of the hall, striving to get through.

And then a cry of hope left Trent's lips. He turned and ran back into the house. He grabbed the long leash from its wall hook beside the rear door and then he swung the door partway open.

"Brutus! Quiet, Brutus!"

The head of the Great Dane struggled through the partly opened door, a snarl of rage welling from the huge dog's mouth as Trent shouted at it.

Then he slipped the leash into its metal ring around the neck of the dog and pulled the door open.

The animal rushed into the hall, nearly tearing the leash from Fred Trent's hands as it lunged forward.

The dog paused beside the open door of the consultation room where the body of Fenwick lay dead and still on
the floor. The animal lifted its muzzle and sniffed the air. A howl of anguished rage left it then and Trent knew that the dog sensed its master had been murdered. And then it caught the scent of the monster, the thing that had caused its wild rage to be unleashed, and it leaped forward, down the hall and out the front door into the night.

Trent held the leash tightly in his hands, running behind the straining dog, jumping over a low hedge after the animal as it headed down the shadowed street to the edge of the city.

And then the last house was behind them and Trent was racing behind the dog out into the desert land beyond.

* * * * *

His breath was an aching fire in his throat. His legs were numbed beyond feeling. They were parts of his body that simply refused to stop moving, though every nerve and muscle in them screamed in protest.

It seemed like he had been running for hours, half tripping, stumbling across the darkened ground behind the seemingly tireless body of the Great Dane.

They ran in near silence now. Only the sounds of their labored breathing mingled with the night wind. The howls of rage no longer issued from the throat of the huge dog. There was only its panting breath, and the strain of its mighty body as it sought to tear loose from the man holding it.

But Trent held grimly to the leash, running as fast as his numbed body would go.

And he knew he could not go much further. That soon he would drop to the ground in exhaustion. That his last reserve of energy was nearly spent.

And then his eyes peered through the darkness ahead and he saw a glow of lights in the distance. And suddenly he knew those lights. And he became aware of where they were racing toward.

It was the Rocket Proving Grounds!

And the fence of the government project loomed close ahead.

And as they neared the fence, Trent's eyes pierced the darkness and he saw a jagged tear in the metal mesh of the fence. A tear that stood as high as a man, a hole through which a man could have entered.

The Great Dane bounded toward that hole and Trent followed the dog through it. He felt the animal pause momentarily and he nearly stumbled over a body lying on the ground at his feet just inside the fence.

His heart stood still for a moment and the girl's name sped to his lips. But he never uttered the word. For he suddenly saw that it was the body of a guard. A body whose torn throat lay red and gory in death.

And then the Great Dane let a howl of anger out on the night wind, and the beast leaped forward again, Trent running behind it.

And ahead of them, Trent saw a great looming shape in the darkness, and as his eyes fell upon it, a despairing terror gripped him.

It was the second rocket! Standing in its cradle, silent in the night, a shaft of metal that looked skyward.

And a realization of what the monster had in mind struck him. He knew now where they were headed. He knew why the monster had torn the fence, why a guard had been killed where he stood.

And as if the thought had been a prelude, he saw the rocket loom before them as the Great Dane bounded around its base.

And he saw the metal stairway leading up to the middle of the giant projectile.

And at the top of those stairs, going into the now open rocket chamber, was the monster, holding the unconscious girl in its arms.

The Great Dane saw the creature in the same instant. And a terrible howl of rage welled from its throat. It gave a lunge forward then that broke Trent's grip from the leash he held. And the dog was free.

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The monster turned in the same moment and saw them. A roar of feline anger left its throat as the huge dog leaped up the steps toward the platform above.

The monster dropped the girl's body on the narrow platform and backed toward the opening of the rocket chamber.

Then the Great Dane reached the platform and poised itself for a leap.

Trent was dashing forward toward the stairs as the dog's body flew through the air. He saw the flashing jaws of the animal snap at the throat of the monster, as its heavy body smashed against it.

Then the arms of the creature were tearing at the dog as it was forced back into the rocket chamber.

Trent's feet flew up the stairs, his breath a tortured gasp in his throat. He saw the girl stir on the platform, as consciousness returned to her.

"Joan!"

Her name sped from his lips as he reached the top step. Then his hands closed around the girl's shoulders, lifting her to her feet.

The snarl of the Great Dane reached his ears from the rocket chamber, and the answering roar of rage from the
monster as they fought. His eyes saw the vague, terrible shadows of them, heard the snapping jaws of the dog, and the raking claws.

And then he was dragging the girl down the steps.

They reached the ground and Trent pulled her away from the rocket, felt her come to life in his arms, heard the sob on her lips.

But his head turned away from her and he stared anxiously up at the open rocket chamber.

He heard the bodies of the monster and the dog slam against the inner side of the chamber, and then he saw the door of the rocket close. He knew that the automatic mechanism must have been touched in the battle.

And even as the thought ran through his mind he heard a sudden roar of flaming sound. The night lit up in a sheet of brilliant light and a wave of flame spread out from the base of the rocket.

Trent pulled the girl away from that blinding sheet of exploding energy, and his eyes stared in grim fascination as they ran.

He saw the rocket shudder in its cradle and then lift slowly. It was as if time had turned back and he were watching an identical scene that had happened earlier that day.

Only it wasn’t the same scene. It was now a scene of horror. For he knew that the monster and the dog were in that rocket. The rocket that would shoot skyward in moments, even as its companion had done. Would reach into the outer fringes of the Earth’s atmosphere where the cosmic rays would envelop it, would react upon the animals inside it.

And a terrible dread spread through Trent at the thought. For if the first change had been terrible enough, what would happen now?

And as he thought, he saw the rocket lift slowly from its cradle and gather speed as it shot upward into the night.

* * * * *

The blinding light of the exploding rocket fuel lit the proving grounds like a huge beacon of incandescence, and Trent was aware of shouts ahead of him, and running feet.

Then he was surrounded by men from the project, and he caught the glint of alert weapons and uniforms.

He felt arms grab him and the girl and heard questions pounding at him.

"Dr. Mathieson! Listen to me!"

The scientist stepped up to him and Trent gripped his arm in the fading light of the vanishing rocket.

"What's happened here?" the scientist demanded. "Aren’t you one of the newsman--"

Trent interrupted him. He poured out a string of words. Words that told what had happened. And as he talked he saw the eyes of the scientist widen in disbelief. And he heard the guards grow silent around him. Felt every ear listening with awe to his words.

And when he had finished there was a long moment of silence. And then Joan Drake moved tremblingly up beside Trent and she spoke:

"It's true, doctor! Every word Fred said is true!"

And one of the guards broke in:

"The word just came in from post four. The fence was torn to pieces--and Giddings has been murdered--just as they said!"

Then the silence again. And the face of Mathieson was grim as Trent broke through the quiet:

"--Doctor--that monster who was Gaddon--he's up there now! When the cosmic rays change him and the dog and the chamber is released ..."

The scientist shook his head slowly, a look of awe in his eyes.

"It won't release, Trent," he said.

Fred Trent looked at him questioningly.

"Gaddon must have forgotten one thing," the scientist continued. "That rocket was also an experimental project. But not for the same purpose. It was to test a new type of explosive ..."

Mathieson's voice trailed off and silence closed over the small group then.

There was no need to say anything further. There was only the tension of waiting, the tension that showed in every eye.

And the girl moved closer to Trent, her body trembling against his.

They waited. The seconds passed like moments in eternity. Slowly they marched by, one by one. And then a minute. And the tension grew.

They heard it then. Off in the distance. Out in the waste of the open desert land. A thundering sound. An explosion that rolled in a wave of sound.
And with it a flash of brilliant light. Light that seared through the night in a terrible wave. And with it the thunder of the explosive warhead.

And then silence.

After a long moment the voice of Mathieson came through the quiet night wind.

"... It's over. Gaddon is--dead. Poor fool, he fumbled with the tools of creation, tools that man is not ready to wield ..."

And Trent heard one of the soldiers gasp, "What a story! What a story!"

But he knew, as he held the girl against him, felt her body relax beside his, that it was a story he didn't want to write.

He wanted only to forget ...

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**Contents**

**THE LAST SUPPER**

By T. D. Hamm

Hampered as she was by the child in her arms, the woman was running less fleetly now. A wave of exultation swept over Guldran, drowning out the uneasy feeling of guilt at disobeying orders.

The instructions were mandatory and concise: "No capture must be attempted individually. In the event of sighting any form of human life, the ship MUST be notified immediately. All small craft must be back at the landing space not later than one hour before take-off. Anyone not so reporting will be presumed lost."

Guldran thought uneasily of the great seas of snow and ice sweeping inexorably toward each other since the Earth had reversed on its axis in the great catastrophe a millennium ago. Now, summer and winter alike brought paralyzing gales and blizzards, heralded by the sleety snow in which the woman's skin-clad feet had left the tracks which led to discovery.

His trained anthropologist's mind speculated avidly over the little they had gotten from the younger of the two men found nearly a week before, nearly frozen and half-starved. The older man had succumbed almost at once; the other, in the most primitive sign language, had indicated that, of several humans living in caves to the west, only he and the other had survived to flee some mysterious terror. Guldran felt a throb of pity for the woman and her child, left behind by the men, no doubt, as a hindrance.

But what a stroke of fortune that there should be left a male and female of the race to carry the seed of Terra to another planet. And what a triumph if he, Guldran, should be the one to return at the eleventh hour with the prize. No need of calling for help. This was no armed war-party, but the most defenseless being in the Universe--a mother burdened with a child.

Guldran put on another burst of speed. His previous shouts had served only to spur the woman to greater efforts. Surely there was some magic word that had survived even the centuries of illiteracy. Something equivalent to the "bread and salt" of all illiterate peoples. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, "Food! food!"

Ahead of him the woman turned her head, leaped lightly in mid-stride, and went on; slowing a little but still running doggedly.

Guldran's pulse leaped. He yelled again, "Food!"

The instant that his foot touched the yielding surface of the trap, he knew that he had met defeat. As his body crashed down on the fire-sharpened stakes, he knew too the terror from which the last men of the human race had fled.

Above him the woman looked down, her teeth gleaming wolfishly. She pointed down into the pit; spoke exultantly to the child.

"Food!" said the last woman on earth.

THE END

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**Contents**

**THE PASSENGER**

By KENNETH HARMON
The classic route to a man's heart is through his stomach -- and she was just his dish.

The transport swung past Centaurus on the last leg of her long journey to Sol. There was no flash, no roar as she swept across the darkness of space. As silent as a ghost, as quiet as a puff of moonlight she moved, riding the gravitational fields that spread like tangled, invisible spider webs between the stars.

Within the ship there was also silence, but the air was stirred by a faint, persistent vibration from the field generators. This noiseless pulse stole into every corner of the ship, through long, empty passageways lined with closed stateroom doors, up spiraling stairways to the bridge and navigational decks, and down into vast and echoing holds, filled with strange cargo from distant worlds.

This vibration pulsed through Lenore's stateroom. As she relaxed on her couch, she bathed in it, letting it flow through her to tingle in her fingertips and whisper behind her closed eyelids.

"Home," it pulsed, "you're going home."

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She repeated the word to herself, moving her lips softly but making no sound. "Home," she breathed, "back home to Earth." Back to the proud old planet that was always home, no matter how far you wandered under alien suns. Back to the shining cities clustered along blue seacoasts. Back to the golden grainlands of the central states and the high, blue grandeur of the western mountains. And back to the myriad tiny things that she remembered best, the little, friendly things ... a stretch of maple-shadowed streets heavy and still with the heat of a summer noon; a flurry of pigeons in the courthouse square; yellow dandelions in a green lawn, the whir of a lawnmower and the smell of the cut grass; ivy on old bricks and the rough feel of oak bark under her hands; water lilies and watermelons and crepe papery dances and picnics by the river in the summer dusk; and the library steps in the evening, with fireflies in the cool grass and the school chimes sounding the slow hours through the friendly dark.

She thought to herself, "It's been such a long time since you were home. There will be a whole new flock of pigeons now." She smiled at the recollection of the eager, awkward girl of twenty that she had been when she had finished school and had entered the Government Education Service. "Travel While Helping Others" had been the motto of the GES.

She had traveled, all right, a long, long way inside a rusty freighter without a single porthole, to a planet out on the rim of the Galaxy that was as barren and dreary as a cosmic slag heap. Five years on the rock pile, five years of knocking yourself out trying to explain history and Shakespeare and geometry to a bunch of grubby little miners' kids in a tin schoolhouse at the edge of a cluster of tin shacks that was supposed to be a town. Five years of trudging around with your nails worn and dirty and your hair chopped short, of wearing the latest thing in overalls. Five years of not talking with the young miners because they got in trouble with the foreman, and not talking with the crewmen from the ore freighters because they got in trouble with the first mate, and not talking with yourself because you got in trouble with the psychologist.

They took care of you in the Education Service; they guarded your diet and your virtue, your body and your mind. Everything but your happiness.

* * * * *

There was lots to do, of course. You could prepare lessons and read papers and cheap novels in the miners' library, or nail some more tin on your quarters to keep out the wind and the dust and the little animals. You could go walking to the edge of town and look at all the pretty gray stones and the trees, like squashed-down barrel cactus; watch the larger sun sink behind the horizon with its little companion star circling around it, diving out of sight to the right and popping up again on the left. And Saturday night--yippee!--three-year-old movies in the tin hangar. And, after five years, they come and say, "Here's Miss So-and-So, your relief, and here's your five thousand credits and wouldn't you like to sign up for another term?"

Ha!

So they give you your ticket back to Earth. You're on the transport at last, and who can blame you if you act just a little crazy and eat like a pig and take baths three times a day and lie around your stateroom and just dream about getting home and waking up in your own room in the morning and getting a good cup of real coffee at the corner fountain and kissing some handsome young fellow on the library steps when the Moon is full behind the bell tower?

"And will the young fellow like you?" she asked herself, knowing the answer even as she asked the question.

She whirled about in the middle of the stateroom, her robe swirling around her, and ended with a deep curtsy to the full-length mirror.

"Allow me to introduce myself," she murmured. "Lenore Smithson, formerly of the Government Education Service, just back from business out on the Rim. What? Why, of course you may have this dance. Your name? Mr.
Fairheart! Of the billionaire Fairhearts?" She waltzed with herself a moment. Halting before the mirror again, she
surveyed herself critically.
"Well," she said aloud, "the five years didn't completely ruin you, after all. Your nose still turns up and your
cheeks still dimple when you smile. You have a nice tan and your hair's grown long again. Concentrated food hasn't
hurt your figure, either." She turned this way and that before the mirror to observe herself.
Then suddenly she gave a little gasp of surprise and fright, for a cascade of laughter had flooded soundlessly
inside her head.

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She stood frozen before the mirror while the laughter continued. Then she slowly swung around. It ceased
abruptly. She looked around the compartment, staring accusingly at each article of furniture in turn; then quickly
spun around to look behind her, meeting her own startled gaze in the mirror.

Opening the door slowly, she ventured to thrust her head out into the corridor. It was deserted, the long rows of
doors all closed during the afternoon rest period. As she stood there, a steward came along the corridor with a tray of
glasses, nodded to her, and passed on out of sight. She turned back into the room and stood there, leaning against the
door, listening.

Suddenly the laughter came again, bursting out as though it had been suppressed and could be held back no
longer. Clear, merry, ringing and completely soundless, it poured through her mind.
"What is it?" she cried aloud. "What's happening?"
"My dear young lady," said a man's voice within her head, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is
Fairheart. Of the billionaire Fairhearts. May I have the next dance?"
"This is it," she thought. "Five years on the rock pile would do it to anyone. You've gone mad."
She laughed shakily. "I can't dance with you if I can't see you."
"I really should explain," the voice replied, "and apologize for my silly joke. It was frightfully rude to laugh at
you, but when I saw you waltzing and preening yourself, I just couldn't help it. I'm a telepath, you see, from
Dekker's star, out on the Rim."

That would explain, she thought, his slightly stilted phraseology; English was apparently not his native tongue--
or, rather, his native thought.
"There was a mild mutation among the settlers there, and the third generation all have this ability. I shouldn't
use it, I know, but I've been so lonely, confined here to my room, that I cast around to see if there were anyone that I
could talk to. Then I came upon you considering your own virtues, and you were so cute and funny that I couldn't
resist. Then I laughed and you caught me."

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"I've heard of telepaths," she said doubtfully, "though I've never heard of Dekker's star. However, I don't think
you have any right to go thinking around the ship spying on people."
"Sh!" whispered the silent voice. "You needn't shout. I'll go away if you wish and never spy on you again, but
don't tell Captain Blake, or he'll have me sealed in a lead-lined cell or something. We're not supposed to telepath
around others, but I've been sitting here with all sorts of interesting thoughts just tickling the edges of my mind for
so long that I had to go exploring."
"Why not go exploring on your own two feet like anyone else? Have you so much brains, your head's too heavy
to carry?"
"Unfortunately," the voice mourned, "my trouble is in my foot and not in my head. On the second night out
from Dekker's star, I lost my footing on the stairs from the dining hall and plunged like a comet to the bottom. I
would probably have been killed but for the person of a stout steward who, at that moment, started to ascend the
stairs. He took the full impact of my descent on his chest and saved my life, I'm sure. However, I still received a
broken ankle that has given me so much pain that I have been forced to remain in my cabin.
"I have had no one to talk to except the steward who brings me my meals, and, as he is the one whom I met on
the stairs, he has little to say. In the morning he frowns at me, at noon he glowers, and in the evening he remarks
hopefully, 'Foot still pretty bad?' Thus, I'm starved for conversation."

Lenore smiled at this earnest speech. "I might talk with you for a minute or two, but you must admit that you
have one advantage over me. You can see me, or so you say, and know what I look like, but I can't see you. It isn't
fair."
"I can show myself to you," he said, "but you'll have to help me by closing your eyes and concentrating very
hard."

* * * * *

She closed her eyes and waited expectantly. There was a moment of darkness; then there appeared in the
middle of the darkness a point of light, a globe, a giant balloon of color. Suddenly she was looking into the corner of
a stateroom which appeared to hang in space. In the center of the area stood a handsome young man in a startling black and orange lounging robe, holding on to the back of a chair.

She opened her eyes; for an instant the vision of the young telepath hung in the air over her couch like a ghostly double exposure. Then it faded and the room was empty.

"That's a terrible effort," came his thought, "particularly when I have to balance on one foot at the same time. Well, now are we even?"

Abandoning her post by the door, she moved to the couch and sat down. "I'm really disappointed," she smiled. "I was sure you'd have two heads. But I think you do have nice eyes and a terrible taste in bathrobes." She took a cigarette from her case and lit it carefully. Then she remembered her manners and extended the case to the empty air. "Won't you have one?"

"I certainly would like to. I'm all out of them until the steward brings my dinner. But I'm afraid I'll have to wait, unless you can blow the smoke through the ventilators to me, or unless ... you bring me one?"

Lenore blushed and changed the subject. "Tell me, what do you do all day in your stateroom? Do you read? Do you play the flute? Do you telepath sweet nothings across the light-years to your girl friend on Dekker's star?"

"I'm afraid my telepathic powers are a bit short-ranged to reach Dekker's star," he replied. "Besides, what girl would commune with me through the depths of space when some other young man is calling her from the dancing pavilion? And my musical talents are limited. However, I do read. I brought some books connected with the research I intend to do on Earth for my degree, and I have spent many happy hours poring over the thrilling pages of Extraterrestrial Entomology and Galactic Arachnida."

"I came better prepared than you did," she said. "Perhaps I could lend you some of my books. I have novels, plays, poetry, and one very interesting volume called Progressive Education under Rim Star Conditions. But," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "I must tell you a secret about that last one."

"What is it?"

"I haven't even opened it."

* * * * *

They laughed together, her merriment bubbling aloud in her cabin, his echoing silently inside her mind.

"I haven't time to read a novel," his thought came, "and drama always bored me, but I must confess to a weakness for poetry. I love to read it aloud, to throw myself into a heroic ballad and rush along, spouting grand phrases as though they were my own and feeling for a moment as though I were really striding the streets of ancient Rome, pushing west on the American frontier or venturing out into space in the first wild, reckless, heroic days of rocket travel. But I soon founder. I get swept away by the rhythm, lost in the intricacies of cadence and rhyme, and, when the pace slows down, when the poem becomes soft and delicate and the meaning is hidden behind a foliage of little gentle words, I lose myself entirely."

She said softly, "Perhaps I could help you interpret some verses."

Then she waited, clasping her hands to keep them from trembling with the tiny thrill of excitement she felt.

"That would be kind of you," he said after a pause. "You could read, there, and I could listen, here, and feel what you feel as you read ... or, if you wished ..." Another pause. "Would you care to come down?"

She could not help smiling. "You're too good a mind reader. A girl can't have any secrets any more."

"Now look here," he burst out. "I wouldn't have said anything, but I was so lonely and you're the only friendly person I've come in contact with and ..."

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course I'll come down and read to you. I'd love to. What's your cabin number?"

"It hasn't got a number because--actually I work on this ship so I'm away from the passengers' quarters. But I can direct you easily. Just start down the hall to your left and ..."

"My dear sir," she cried, "just wait a minute! I can't come visiting in my robe, you know; I'll have to change. But while I dress, you must take your spying little thoughts away. If I detect you peeking in here at the wrong moment, I'll run straight to Captain Blake and have him prepare his special lead-lined cell for one unhappy telepath. So you just run along. When I'm ready, I'll call you and you can lead me to your lair."

He thought only the one word, "Hurry," but in the silence after he was gone she fancied she heard her heart echoing him, loud in the stillness.

* * * * *

She laughed gaily to herself. "Now stop acting like a schoolgirl before the Junior Prom. You've got to get busy and wash and dress and comb and brush." And then to her reflection in the mirror: "Aren't you a lucky girl? You're still millions and billions of miles from Earth and it's starting already, and he's going to do research there for some time, and maybe at the university in your home town if you tell him just how nice it is, and he doesn't know any other girls, you'd have an inside track. Now you'd better get going or you'll never be ready."
"For reading poetry, don't you think this dress is just the thing, this nice soft blue one that goes so well with your tan and shows your legs, which are really quite pretty, you know.... And your silver sandals and those silver pins ... just a touch of perfume.... That's right; and now a little lipstick. You do have a pretty smile.... There, that's right. Now stop admiring yourself and let's go."

She moved to the bookshelf, frowning now, considered, selected and rejected. Finally she settled on three slim books bound in russet leather, in glossy plastic, in faded cloth. She took a little purse from the table, put the cigarette case into it. Then, with a laugh, she took one cigarette and slipped it into a tiny pocket on her skirt.

"I really meant to bring you one," she whispered to the empty air, "but wasn't I mean to tease?"

In the corridor, she walked quickly past the rows of closed doors to the tiny refreshment stand at the foot of the dining room stairs. The attendant rose from his stool as she approached, and came to the counter.

"I'd like two frosted starlights, please," she said, "on a tray."

"Two," said the attendant, and nothing more, but his eyebrow climbed up his forehead, hung for a second, then slowly drooped back to normal, as if to say that after all these years he no longer puzzled about a lovely young girl who came around in the middle of a Wednesday rest period, dressed like Saturday night and smelling of perfume, ordering two intoxicating drinks—when she was obviously traveling alone.

* * * * *

Lenore felt a thrill of secret pleasure go through her, a feeling of possessing a delicious secret, a delightful sensation of reckless gaiety, of life stirring throughout the sleepy ship, of a web of secrets and countersecrets hidden from everyone but this unconcerned observer.

She walked back down the corridor, balancing the tray. When a little splashed over the rim of the tall glasses, she took a sip from each, tasting the sweet, cold liquid in her throat.

When she came to the head of the stairs, she realized that she did not even know her telepath's name. Closing her eyes, she said very slowly and distinctly inside her head, "Mr. Fairheart?"

Instantly his thought was with her, overpowering, as breathless as an embrace. "Where are you?"

"At the head of the central stairs."

"Down you go."

She went down the stairs, through more corridors, down more stairs, while he guided her steps. Once she paused to sip again at each glass when the liquid splashed as she was going down. The ice tickled her nose and made her sneeze.

"You live a long way down," she said.

"I've got to be near my charges," he answered. "I told you I work on the ship; I'm a zoologist classifying any of the new specimens of extraterrestrial life they're always picking up. And I always get stuck with the worst quarters on the ship. Why, I can't even call all my suite my own. The whole front room is filled with some sort of ship's gear that my steward stumbles over every meal time."

She went on and on, down and down. "How many flights?" she wondered. "Two or twelve or twenty?" Now, why couldn't she remember? Only four little sips and her mind felt so cloudy. Down another corridor, and what was that funny smell? These passages were poorly ventilated in the lower levels; probably that was what made her feel so dizzy.

"Only one more flight," he whispered. "Only one more."

Down and along and then the door. She paused, conscious of rising excitement, conscious of her beating heart.

Dimly she noticed the sign on the door. "You--you mean whatever it is you're taking care of is in there with you?"

"Don't be frightened," his persuasive thought came. "It can't hurt you. It's locked in a cage."

Then she slid the bolt and turned the handle. Her head hurt for an instant; and she was inside, a blue and silver shadow in the dim anteroom, with the tray in her hand and the books under her arm and her pulse hammering.

She looked around the dim anteroom, at the spidery tangle of orange and black ropes against the left-hand wall; then at the doorway in the right-hand wall with the warm light streaming through. He was standing in the second room, one hand on the chair for support, the other extended toward her. For the first time he spoke aloud.

"Hello, butterfly," he said.

"Hello," she said. She smiled and walked forward into the light. She reached out for his hand.

Then she stopped short, her hand pressed against an impenetrable wall.

* * * * *

She could see him standing there, smiling, reaching for her hand, but there was an invisible barrier between them. Then, slowly, his room began to fade, the light dimmed, his figure grew watery, transparent, vanished. She was standing, staring at the riveted steel bulkhead of a compartment which was lit only by the dim light filtering through the thick glass over the transom.
She stood there frozen, and the ice in the glasses tinkled nervously. Then the tray slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Icy liquid splashed the silver sandals. In the silent gloom she stood immobile, her eyes wide in her white face, her fist pressed to her mouth, stifling a scream.

Something touched her gently at head and wrist and ankle—all over her body. The web clung, delicate as lace, strong as steel.

Even if she had been able to move, she could not have broken free as the thing against the wall began to clamber down the strands on eight furred legs.

"Hello, butterfly," he said again.

Contents

GOODBYE, DEAD MAN!
by Tom W. Harris

Mattup had killed a man, so it was logical he should be punished. It was Danny who came up with the idea of leaving him with the prophecy—

It was Orley Mattup’s killing of the old lab technician that really made us hate him.

Mattup was a guard at the reactor installation at Bayless, Kentucky, where my friend Danny Hern and I were part of the staff when the Outsiders took everything over. In what god-forsaken mountain hole they had found Mattup, and how they got him to sell out to them, I don’t know. He was an authentic human, though. You can tell an Outsider.

Mattup and Danny and I were playing high-low-jack the night Uncle Pete was killed, sitting on the widewalk where Mattup had a view of the part of the station he was responsible for. High-low-jack is a back-country card game; Danny had learned it in northern Pennsylvania, where he came from, and Mattup loved the game, and they had taught it to me because the game is better three-handed. The evening sessions had been Danny’s idea—I think he figured it might give him a line on Mattup.

On the night in question, Mattup was on a week’s losing streak and was in a foul humor. He was superstitious, and he had called for a new deck twice that evening and walked around his seat four different times. His bidding was getting wilder.

"You’d better cool down," Danny told him. "Thing to do is ride out the bad luck, not fight it."

Orley picked his nose and looked at his cards, "Bid four," he growled.

Four is the highest possible bid. Tim played his cards well and he had good ones. He had sewed up three of his points when we heard somebody moving around down on the reactor floor. It was old Uncle Pete Barker, one of the technicians.

"What you want down there?" bawled Mattup.

"Just left my cap by the control room," said Uncle Pete, "and thought I’d go get it."

"You keep the hell away from there," grunted Mattup.

Uncle Pete stopped and stood gazing up at us. We went on playing. It was the last card of the hand, and would either win the game for Mattup or lose it for him. Orley slapped his card down; it was a crucial card, the jack. Danny took it with a queen and Mattup had lost the game.

I felt like clearing out. Mattup’s face was purple and his eyes looked like wolves’ eyes. He glared at Danny, making a noise in his throat, and then I saw his gaze leave Danny and go to something down by the reactor.

It was Uncle Pete, shuffling along toward the control room.

Mattup didn’t say a word. He stood up and unholstered the thing the Outsiders had given him and pointed it at Uncle Pete. There was a ringing in our ears and Uncle Pete began to twist. Something inside him twisted him, twisting inside his arms, his legs, head, trunk, even his fingers. It was only for a few seconds. Then the ringing stopped, and Uncle Pete sunk to the ground, and there was the silence and the smell.

Mattup made us leave the body there until we had played two more hands. Danny won one; he was a man with good nerves. When we were back in our room he said, "That did it—I’m going to get that guy."

"I hate his big thick guts," I said, buttoning my pajama shirt, "but how are you going to get him?"

"I’ll get him," said Danny. "Meanwhile, we’ll keep playing cards."

Things went on almost normally at the Bayless reactor. It was a privately-owned pool-type reactor, and we were sent samples of all sorts of material for irradiation from all over the country. Danny was one of the irradiation
men; I generally handled controlling. The Outsiders had filled the place with telescreens and guards, and all mail was opened, but there was no real interference with the work. I began to worry a little about Danny. Almost every afternoon he spent an hour alone in our room, with the door closed.

Mattup kept getting worse; an animal with power. He used to go hunting with the damnable Outsider weapon, although the meat killed with it wasn't fit to eat, and he used it on birds until there wasn't one left anywhere near the plant. He never killed a bluebird, though. He said it was bad luck. Sometimes he drank moonshine corn liquor, usually alone, because the Outsiders wouldn't touch it, but sometimes he made some of us drink with him, watching sharply to see we didn't poison him and craftily picking his nose. When he was drunk he was abusive.

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One night we were in our room, dead for sleep after a long game, and Danny said, "Let me show you something."

He shuffled the cards, I cut, and he dealt me an ace, king, queen, jack, ten and deuce of spades. He shuffled again and dealt me the same in hearts.

"Watch as closely as you can," he grinned. "See if you can catch me."

I couldn't.

"I've been practicing," he said. "I'm going to get Mattup."

"What good will it do to beat him in cards? You'll only make him sore." I was relieved to learn what Danny had been doing, alone in our room, but this card-sharp angle didn't make much sense to me.

"Who says I'm going to beat him at cards?" smiled Danny. "By the way, did you hear the rumor? They're going to break up the staff, Outsider policy, send us to Oak Ridge, Argonne, Shippingport, send new people down here."

"That doesn't leave you much time," I said.

"Time enough," said Danny.

The next night Mattup began a fantastic streak of luck. It seemed he couldn't lose, and he was as unpleasant a winner as he was a loser.

"You boys don't know what card-playin' is," he'd gloat. "Think you're pretty smarty with all that science stuff but you can't win a plain old card game. You know why you can't beat me, boys?"

"Because you're too smart, I guess," said Danny.

"Well, yeah, and somethin' else. I dipped my hands in spunk water, up on the mountain where you can never find it, and besides that I spit on ever' card in this deck and wiped it off. Couldn't lose now to save my life."

"Maybe you're right," said Danny, and went on dealing.

In a few days the rumor of moving was confirmed; I was being sent to Oak Ridge, Danny to Argonne. Mattup kept winning, and "suggested" that we raise the stakes. By the day that we were to leave we owed him every cent we had.

I paid up soberly; I wouldn't give Mattup any satisfaction by complaining. It looked as though Danny wasn't going to "get" Mattup after all. But Danny surprised me.

"Look, buster," he wheedled. "If I pay you seventy-five bucks I won't have a cent left. How about me paying half now and the rest later?"

"No good," said Mattup. "You got it--pay me. If you can't pay cash gimme your watch. I know you got one."

"Look, buster--"

"Quit callin' me buster."

"What am I going to live on until I get paid again?"

"What do I care?"

It went on like that until the busses for the airport were nearly ready to leave and both men seemed angry enough to kill each other.


"All right then!" Danny snapped, and pulled out his wallet. He counted out all his bills into Mattup's hand.

"You're a buck short," said Mattup.

"Why not forget the buck?" said Danny. "You can spare it."

"You're a buck short," repeated Mattup, scowling.

Danny dashed his wallet to the ground. "You're even taking my change!" He got his jacket from the back of a chair--it was a hot day--and emptied change from the side pocket.

There were two quarters and a half dollar, and he paid them over. "I have eleven cents left," he said. "Hell, take that too. I don't give a damn."

Mattup grinned. "Sure I'll take it--if you weren't lying when you said I could have it."

"It'll break me," said Danny.

"I know it," said Mattup. "Gonna break your promise?"
The bus driver was honking. "The hell with you," Danny said to Mattup, and gave him a dime and a penny. He looked Mattup in the eye with a strange expression. "Now, I gave you that and you didn't win it. You took it of your own free will. I offered it to you and you took it. Right?"

"Right," said Mattup. "Sucker."

We scrambled on the bus and as it pulled away Danny yelled "Hey, Buster, look!" Mattup looked, and Danny stuck his right arm out the window, pointing at Mattup with his right forefinger and his little finger stuck out straight and parallel, the thumb tucked under. A strange, disturbed look came over Orley. He turned his back as the bus roared out of the drive.

At the airport Danny popped into a phone-booth and got Orley on the line--nobody seemed to care, either Outsiders or guards--and he let me listen.

"Spent your money yet, dead man?" purred Danny.

"Whacha mean, dead man?" gruffed Orley's voice. "You crazy or something?"

"You know that eleven cents extra you took?" gloated Danny. "It's gonna kill you, Buster, for killing Uncle Pete, and for everything else you've done. I know. I've been talking nights to Uncle Pete. You're a dead duck, Orley Mattup! Dead!"

"That's--I don't believe it, it's baloney! I'm going to spend that eleven cents and get rid of it."

"You do exactly that, Buster. I locked the curse on it, and I made the sign on you, and you have to keep that eleven cents the rest of your life. If you spend it--or if you lose it, and you will lose it--that's the end of you."

"I'll come out there and pound the hell out of you!" yelled Mattup.

"Too late, Buster, our planes are leaving. Goodbye, dead man!"

And we had to run for our planes. Danny's pitch sounded pretty weak to me, even though Orley was superstitious, but I didn't get to tell Danny that until nearly five years later.

*I * * *

"I think I got him," said Danny. "You don't know the whole thing."

A hotel clerk had been listening. "You mean Orley Mattup, the guard? He got sick, and said he had a hex on him, and took off one day and a lot later they found him up on the mountain. He was dead."

"Any money on him?" asked Danny.

"Jest some change. They buried it with him; they heard the hex was locked onto that money."

"Congratulations," I told Danny. "I didn't think it'd work. You scared him to death."

"Not quite," said Danny. "I scared him into hanging onto the money. That money would have killed anybody that carried it much longer than the few minutes I handled it. I'd been keeping the stuff in the reactor beam tubes. It was radioactive as hell."
It was ten P.M., curfew hour for robots. Lights out and lock yourself in until six in the morning, eight hours of boredom and darkness for all except the few night workers. But there were ways of getting around the letter of a law that didn't concern itself with a definition of visible light. Sliding aside some of the shielding around his atomic generator, Jon turned up the gain. As it began to run a little hot the heat waves streamed out—visible to him as infra-red rays. He finished reading the paper in the warm, clear light of his abdomen.

The thermocouple in the tip of his second finger left hand, he tested the temperature of his leg. It was soon cool enough to work on. The waterproof gasket stripped off easily, exposing the power leads, nerve wires and the weakened knee joint. The wires disconnected, Jon unscrewed the knee above the joint and carefully placed it on the shelf in front of him. With loving care he took the replacement part from his hip pouch. It was the product of toil, purchased with his savings from three months employment on the Jersey pig farm.

Jon was standing on one leg testing the new knee joint when the ceiling fluorescent flickered and came back on. Five-thirty already, he had just finished in time. A shot of oil on the new bearing completed the job; he stowed away the tools in the pouch and unlocked the door.

The unused elevator shaft acted as waste chute, he slipped his newspaper through a slot in the door as he went by. Keeping close to the wall, he picked his way carefully down the grease-stained stairs. He slowed his pace at the 17th floor as two other mechs turned in ahead of him. They were obviously butchers or meat-cutters; where the right hand should have been on each of them there stuck out a wicked, foot-long knife. As they approached the foot of the stairs they stopped to slip the knives into the plastic sheaths that were bolted to their chestplates. Jon followed them down the ramp into the lobby.

The room was filled to capacity with robots of all sizes, forms and colors. Jon Venex's greater height enabled him to see over their heads to the glass doors that opened onto the street. It had rained the night before and the rising sun drove red glints from the puddles on the sidewalk. Three robots, painted snow white to show they were night workers, pushed the doors open and came in. No one went out as the curfew hadn't ended yet. They milled around slowly talking in low voices.

The only human being in the entire lobby was the night clerk dozing behind the counter. The clock over his head said five minutes to six. Shifting his glance from the clock, Jon became aware of a squat black robot waving to attract his attention. The powerful arms and compact build identified him as a member of the Diger family, one of the most numerous groups. He pushed through the crowd and clapped Jon on the back with a resounding clang.

"Jon Venex! I knew it was you as soon as I saw you sticking up out of this crowd like a green tree trunk. I haven't seen you since the old days on Venus!"

Jon didn't need to check the number stamped on the short one's scratched chestplate. Alec Diger had been his only close friend during those thirteen boring years at Orange Sea Camp. A good chess player and a whiz at Two-handed Handball, they had spent all their off time together. They shook hands, with the extra squeeze that means friendliness.

"Alec, you beat-up little grease pot, what brings you to New York?"

"The burning desire to see something besides rain and jungle, if you must know. After you bought out, things got just too damn dull. I began working two shifts a day in that foul diamond mine, and then three a day for the last month to get enough credits to buy my contract and passage back to earth. I was underground so long that the photocell on my right eye burned out when the sunlight hit it."

He leaned forward with a hoarse confidential whisper, "If you want to know the truth, I had a sixty-carat diamond stuck behind the eye lens. I sold it here on earth for two hundred credits, gave me six months of easy living. It's all gone now, so I'm on my way to the employment exchange." His voice boomed loud again, "And how about you?"

Jon Venex chuckled at his friend's frank approach to life. "It's just been the old routine with me, a run of odd jobs until I got side-swiped by a bus—it fractured my knee bearing. The only job I could get with a bad leg was feeding slops to pigs. Earned enough to fix the knee—and here I am."

Alec jerked his thumb at a rust-colored, three-foot-tall robot that had come up quietly beside him. "If you think you've got trouble take a look at Dik here, that's no coat of paint on him. Dik Dryer, meet Jon Venex an old buddy of mine."

Jon bent over to shake the little mech's hand. His eye shutters dilated as he realized what he had thought was a coat of paint was a thin layer of rust that coated Dik's metal body. Alec scratched a shiny path in the rust with his fingertip. His voice was suddenly serious.

"Dik was designed for operation in the Martian desert. It's as dry as a fossil bone there so his skinflint company cut corners on the stainless steel."

"When they went bankrupt he was sold to a firm here in the city. After a while the rust started to eat in and slow him down, they gave Dik his contract and threw him out."
The small robot spoke for the first time, his voice grated and scratched. "Nobody will hire me like this, but I can't get repaired until I get a job." His arms squeaked and grated as he moved them. "I'm going by the Robot Free Clinic again today, they said they might be able to do something."

Alec Diger rumbled in his deep chest. "Don't put too much faith in those people. They're great at giving out tenth-credit oil capsules or a little free wire—but don't depend on them for anything important."

It was six now, the robots were pushing through the doors into the silent streets. They joined the crowd moving out, Jon slowing his stride so his shorter friends could keep pace. Dik Dryer moved with a jerking, irregular motion, his voice as uneven as the motion of his body.

"Jon—Venex, I don't recognize your family name. Something to do—with Venus—perhaps."

"Venus is right, Venus Experimental—there are only twenty-two of us in the family. We have waterproof, pressure-resistant bodies for working down on the ocean bottom. The basic idea was all right, we did our part, only there wasn't enough money in the channel-dredging contract to keep us all working. I bought out my original contract at half price and became a free robot."

Dik vibrated his rusted diaphragm. "Being free isn't all it should be. I some—times wish the Robot Equality Act hadn't been passed. I would just l-love to be owned by a nice rich company with a machine shop and a—mountain of replacement parts."

"You don't really mean that, Dik," Alec Diger clamped a heavy black arm across his shoulders. "Things aren't perfect now, we know that, but it's certainly a lot better than the old days, we were just hunks of machinery then. Used twenty-four hours a day until we were worn out and then thrown in the junk pile. No thanks, I'll take my chances with things as they are."

Jon and Alec turned into the employment exchange, saying good-by to Dik who went on slowly down the street. They pushed up the crowded ramp and joined the line in front of the registration desk. The bulletin board next to the desk held a scattering of white slips announcing job openings. A clerk was pinning up new additions.

Venex scanned them with his eyes, stopping at one circled in red.

ROBOTS NEEDED IN THESE CATEGORIES. APPLY AT ONCE TO CHAINJET, LTD., 1219 BROADWAY.

Fasten
Flyer
Atommel
Filmer
Venex

Jon rapped excitedly on Alec Diger's neck. "Look there, a job in my own specialty—I can get my old pay rate! See you back at the hotel tonight—and good luck in your job hunting."

Alec waved good-by. "Let's hope the job's as good as you think, I never trust those things until I have my credits in my hand."

Jon walked quickly from the employment exchange, his long legs eating up the blocks. Good old Alec, he didn't believe in anything he couldn't touch. Perhaps he was right, but why try to be unhappy. The world wasn't too bad this morning—his leg worked fine, prospects of a good job—he hadn't felt this cheerful since the day he was activated.

Turning the corner at a brisk pace he collided with a man coming from the opposite direction. Jon had stopped on the instant, but there wasn't time to jump aside. The obese individual jarred against him and fell to the ground. From the height of elation to the depths of despair in an instant—he had injured a human being!

He bent to help the man to his feet, but the other would have none of that. He evaded the friendly hand and screeched in a high-pitched voice.

"Officer, officer, police ... HELP! I've been attacked—a mad robot ... HELP!"

A crowd was gathering—staying at a respectful distance—but making an angry muttering noise. Jon stood motionless, his head reeling at the enormity of what he had done. A policeman pushed his way through the crowd.

"Seize him, officer, shoot him down ... he struck me ... almost killed me ..." The man shook with rage, his words thickening to a senseless babble.

The policeman had his .75 recoilless revolver out and pressed against Jon's side.

"This man has charged you with a serious crime, grease-can. I'm taking you into the station house—to talk about it."

He looked around nervously, waving his gun to open a path through the tightly packed crowd. They moved back grudgingly, with murmurs of disapproval.

Jon's thoughts swirled in tight circles. How did a catastrophe like this happen, where was it going to end? He didn't dare tell the truth, that would mean he was calling the man a liar. There had been six robots power-lined in the city since the first of the year. If he dared speak in his own defense there would be a jumper to the street lighting
circuit and a seventh burnt out hulk in the police morgue.

A feeling of resignation swept through him, there was no way out. If the man pressed charges it would mean a
term of penal servitude, though it looked now as if he would never live to reach the court. The papers had been
whipping up a lot of anti-robe feeling, you could feel it behind the angry voices, see it in the narrowed eyes and
clenched fists. The crowd was slowly changing into a mob, a mindless mob as yet, but capable of turning on him at
any moment.

"What's goin' on here...?" It was a booming voice, with a quality that dragged at the attention of the crowd.

A giant cross-continent freighter was parked at the curb. The driver swung down from the cab and pushed his
way through the people. The policeman shifted his gun as the man strode up to him.

"That's my robot you got there, Jack, don't put any holes in him!" He turned on the man who had been shouting
accusations. "Fatty here, is the world's biggest liar. The robot was standing here waiting for me to park the truck.
Fatty must be as blind as he is stupid, I saw the whole thing. He knocks himself down walking into the robe, then
starts hollering for the cops."

The other man could take no more. His face crimson with anger he rushed toward the trucker, his fists swinging
in ungainly circles. They never landed, the truck driver put a meaty hand on the other's face and seated him on the
sidewalk for the second time.

The onlookers roared with laughter, the power-lining and the robot were forgotten. The fight was between two
men now, the original cause had slipped from their minds. Even the policeman allowed himself a small smile as he
holstered his gun and stepped forward to separate the men.

The trucker turned towards Jon with a scowl.

"Come on you aboard the truck—you've caused me enough trouble for one day. What a junkcan!"

The crowd chuckled as he pushed Jon ahead of him into the truck and slammed the door behind them. Jamming
the starter with his thumb he gunned the thunderous diesels into life and pulled out into the traffic.

Jon moved his jaw, but there were no words to come out. Why had this total stranger helped him, what could he
say to show his appreciation? He knew that all humans weren't robe-haters, why it was even rumored that some
humans treated robots as equals instead of machines. The driver must be one of these mythical individuals, there
was no other way to explain his actions.

Driving carefully with one hand the man reached up behind the dash and drew out a thin, plastikoid booklet. He
handed it to Jon who quickly scanned the title, Robot Slaves in a World Economy by Philpott Asimov II.

"If you're caught reading that thing they'll execute you on the spot. Better stick it between the insulation on
your generator, you can always burn it if you're picked up.

"Read it when you're alone, it's got a lot of things in it that you know nothing about. Robots aren't really
inferior to humans, in fact they're superior in most things. There is even a little history in there to show that robots
aren't the first ones to be treated as second class citizens. You may find it a little hard to believe, but human beings
once treated each other just the way they treat robots now. That's one of the reasons I'm active in this movement—
sort of like the fellow who was burned helping others stay away from the fire."

He smiled a warm, friendly smile in Jon's direction, the whiteness of his teeth standing out against the rich
 ebony brown of his features.

"I'm heading towards US-1, can I drop you anywheres on the way?"

"The Chainjet Building please—I'm applying for a job."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Before he opened the door the driver shook hands with Jon.

"Sorry about calling you junkcan, but the crowd expected it." He didn't look back as he drove away.

Jon had to wait a half hour for his turn, but the receptionist finally signalled him towards the door of the
interviewer's room. He stepped in quickly and turned to face the man seated at the transplastic desk, an upset little
man with permanent worry wrinkles stamped in his forehead. The little man shoved the papers on the desk around
angrily, occasionally making crabbed little notes on the margins. He flashed a birdlike glance up at Jon.

"Yes, yes, be quick. What is it you want?"

"You posted a help wanted notice, I—"

The man cut him off with a wave of his hand. "All right let me see your ID tag ... quickly, there are others
waiting."

Jon thumbed the tag out of his waist slot and handed it across the desk. The interviewer read the code number,
then began running his finger down a long list of similar figures. He stopped suddenly and looked sideways at Jon
from under his lowered lids.

"You have made a mistake, we have no opening for you."

Jon began to explain to the man that the notice had requested his specialty, but he was waved to silence. As the
interviewer handed back the tag he slipped a card out from under the desk blotter and held it in front of Jon's eyes.
He held it there for only an instant, knowing that the written message was recorded instantly by the robot's photographic vision and eidetic memory. The card dropped into the ash tray and flared into embers at the touch of the man's pencil-heater.

Jon stuffed the ID tag back into the slot and read over the message on the card as he walked down the stairs to the street. There were six lines of typewritten copy with no signature.

To Venex Robot: You are urgently needed on a top secret company project. There are suspected informers in the main office, so you are being hired in this unusual manner. Go at once to 787 Washington Street and ask for Mr. Coleman.

Jon felt an immense sensation of relief. For a moment there, he was sure the job had been a false lead. He saw nothing unusual in the method of hiring. The big corporations were immensely jealous of their research discoveries and went to great lengths to keep them secret—at the same time resorting to any means to ferret out their business rivals' secrets. There might still be a chance to get this job.

The burly bulk of a lifter was moving back and forth in the gloom of the ancient warehouse stacking crates in ceiling-high rows. Jon called to him, the robot swung up his forklift and rolled over on noiseless tires. When Jon questioned him he indicated a stairwell against the rear wall.

"Mr. Coleman's office is down in back, the door is marked." The lifter put his fingertips against Jon's ear pick-ups and lowered his voice to the merest shadow of a whisper. It would have been inaudible to human ears, but Jon could hear him easily, the sounds being carried through the metal of the other's body.

"He's the meanest man you ever met—he hates robots so be ever so polite. If you can use 'sir' five times in one sentence you're perfectly safe."

Jon swept the shutter over one eye tube in a conspiratorial wink, the large mech did the same as he rolled away. Jon turned and went down the dusty stairwell and knocked gently on Mr. Coleman's door.

Coleman was a plump little individual in a conservative purple-and-yellow business suit. He kept glancing from Jon to the Robot General Catalog checking the Venex specifications listed there. Seemingly satisfied he slammed the book shut.

"Gimme your tag and back against that wall to get measured."

Jon laid his ID tag on the desk and stepped towards the wall. "Yes, sir, here it is, sir." Two "sir" on that one, not bad for the first sentence. He wondered idly if he could put five of them in one sentence without the man knowing he was being made a fool of.

He became aware of the danger an instant too late. The current surged through the powerful electromagnet behind the plaster flattening his metal body helplessly against the wall. Coleman was almost dancing with glee.

"We got him, Druce, he's mashed flatter than a stinking tin-can on a rock, can't move a motor. Bring that junk in here and let's get him ready."

Druce had a mechanic's coveralls on over his street suit and a tool box slung under one arm. He carried a little black metal can at arm's length, trying to get as far from it as possible. Coleman shouted at him with annoyance.

"That bomb can't go off until it's armed, stop acting like a child. Put it on that grease-can's leg and quick!"

Grunbling under his breath, Druce spot-welded the metal flanges of the bomb onto Jon's leg a few inches above his knee. Coleman tugged at it to be certain it was secure, then twisted a knob in the side and pulled out a glistening length of pin. There was a cold little click from inside the mechanism as it armed itself.

Jon could do nothing except watch, even his vocal diaphragm was locked by the magnetic field. He had more than a suspicion however that he was involved in something other than a "secret business deal." He cursed his own stupidity for walking blindly into the situation.

The magnetic field cut off and he instantly raced his extensor motors to leap forward. Coleman took a plastic box out of his pocket and held his thumb over a switch inset into its top.

"Don't make any quick moves, junk-yard, this little transmitter is keyed to a receiver in that bomb on your leg. One touch of my thumb, up you go in a cloud of smoke and come down in a shower of nuts and bolts." He signalled to Druce who opened a closet door. "And in case you want to be heroic, just think of him."

Coleman jerked his thumb at the sodden shape on the floor; a filthily attired man of indistinguishable age whose only interesting feature was the black bomb strapped tightly across his chest. He peered unseeingly from red-rimmed eyes and raised the almost empty whiskey bottle to his mouth. Coleman kicked the door shut.

"He's just some Bowery bum we dragged in, Venex, but that doesn't make any difference to you, does it? He's human—and a robot can't kill anybody! That rummy has a bomb on him tuned to the same frequency as yours, if you don't play ball with us he gets a two-foot hole blown in his chest."

Coleman was right, Jon didn't dare make any false moves. All of his early mental training as well as Circuit 92 sealed inside his brain case would prevent him from harming a human being. He felt trapped, caught by these people for some unknown purpose.
Coleman had pushed back a tarpaulin to disclose a ragged hole in the concrete floor, the opening extended into the earth below. He waved Jon over.

"The tunnel is in good shape for about thirty feet, then you'll find a fall. Clean all the rock and dirt out until you break through into the storm sewer, then come back. And you better be alone. If you tip the cops both you and the old stew go out together—now move."

The shaft had been dug recently and shored with packing crates from the warehouse overhead. It ended abruptly in a wall of fresh sand and stone. Jon began shoveling it into the little wheelbarrow they had given him.

He had emptied four barrow loads and was filling the fifth when he uncovered the hand, a robot's hand made of green metal. He turned his headlight power up and examined the hand closely, there could be no doubt about it. These gaskets on the joints, the rivet pattern at the base of the thumb meant only one thing, it was the dismembered hand of a Venex robot.

Quickly, yet gently, he shoveled away the rubble behind the hand and unearthed the rest of the robot. The torso was crushed and the power circuits shorted, battery acid was dripping from an ugly rent in the side. With infinite care Jon snapped the few remaining wires that joined the neck to the body and laid the green head on the barrow. It stared at him like a skull, the shutters completely dilated, but no glow of life from the tubes behind them.

He was scraping the mud from the number on the battered chestplate when Druce lowered himself into the tunnel and flashed the brilliant beam of a hand-spot down its length.

"Stop playing with that junk and get digging—or you'll end up the same as him. This tunnel has gotta be through by tonight."

Jon put the dismembered parts on the barrow with the sand and rock and pushed the whole load back up the tunnel, his thoughts running in unhappy circles. A dead robot was a terrible thing, and one of his family too. But there was something wrong about this robot, something that was quite inexplicable, the number on the plate had been "17," yet he remembered only too well the day that a water-shorted motor had killed Venex 17 in the Orange Sea.

It took Jon four hours to drive the tunnel as far as the ancient granite wall of the storm sewer. Druce gave him a short pinch bar and he levered out enough of the big blocks to make a hole large enough to let him through into the sewer.

When he climbed back into the office he tried to look casual as he dropped the pinch bar to the floor by his feet and seated himself on the pile of rubble in the corner. He moved around to make a comfortable seat for himself and his fingers grabbed the severed neck of Venex 17.

Coleman swiveled around in his chair and squinted at the wall clock. He checked the time against his tie-pin watch, with a grunt of satisfaction he turned back and stabbed a finger at Jon.

"Listen, you green junk-pile, at 1900 hours you're going to do a job, and there aren't going to be any slip ups. You go down that sewer and into the Hudson River. The outlet is under water, so you won't be seen from the docks. Climb down to the bottom and walk 200 yards north, that should put you just under a ship. Keep your eyes open, but don't show any lights! About halfway down the keel of the ship you'll find a chain hanging. "Climb the chain, pull loose the box that's fastened to the hull at the top and bring it back here. No mistakes—or you know what happens."

Jon nodded his head. His busy fingers had been separating the wires in the amputated neck. When they had been straightened and put into a row he memorized their order with one flashing glance.

He ran over the color code in his mind and compared it with the memorized leads. The twelfth wire was the main cranial power lead, number six was the return wire.

With his precise touch he separated these two from the pack and glanced idly around the room. Druce was dozing on a chair in the opposite corner. Coleman was talking on the phone, his voice occasionally rising in a petulant whine. This wasn't interfering with his attention to Jon—and the radio switch still held tightly in left hand.

Jon's body blocked Coleman's vision, as long as Druce stayed asleep he would be able to work on the head unobserved. He activated a relay in his forearm and there was a click as the waterproof cover on an exterior socket swung open. This was a power outlet from his battery that was used to operate motorized tools and lights underwater.

If Venex 17's head had been severed for less than three weeks he could reactivate it. Every robot had a small storage battery inside his skull, if the power to the brain was cut off the battery would provide the minimum standby current to keep the brain alive. The robe would be unconscious until full power was restored.

Jon plugged the wires into his arm-outlet and slowly raised the current to operating level. There was a tense moment of waiting, then 17's eye shutters suddenly closed. When they opened again the eye tubes were glowing warmly. They swept the room with one glance then focused on Jon.

The right shutter clicked shut while the other began opening and closing in rapid fashion. It was International
code—being sent as fast as the solenoid could be operated. Jon concentrated on the message.

Telephone—call emergency operator—tell her "signal 14" help will—

The shutter stopped in the middle of a code group, the light of reason dying from the eyes.

For one instant Jon's heart leaped in panic, until he realized that 17 had deliberately cut the power. Druce's harsh voice rasped in his ear.

"What you doing with that? None of your funny robot tricks. I know your kind, plotting all kinds of things in them tin domes." His voice trailed off into a stream of incomprehensible profanity. With sudden spite he lashed his foot out and sent 17's head crashing against the wall.

The dented, green head rolled to a stop at Jon's feet, the face staring up at him in mute agony. It was only Circuit 92 that prevented him from injuring a human. As his motors revved up to send him hurtling forward the control relays clicked open. He sank against the debris, paralyzed for the instant. As soon as the rush of anger was gone he would regain control of his body.

They stood as if frozen in a tableau. The robot slumped backward, the man leaning forward, his face twisted with unreasoning hatred. The head lay between them like a symbol of death.

Coleman's voice cut through the air of tenseness like a knife.

"Druce, stop playing with the grease-can and get down to the main door to let Little Willy and his junk-brokers in. You can have it all to yourself afterward."

The angry man turned reluctantly, but pushed out of the door at Coleman's annoyed growl. Jon sat down against the wall, his mind sorting out the few facts with lightning precision. There was no room in his thoughts for Druce, the man had become just one more factor in a complex problem.

Call the emergency operator—that meant this was no local matter, responsible authorities must be involved. Only the government could be behind a thing as major as this. Signal 14—that inferred a complex set of arrangements, forces that could swing into action at a moment's notice. There was no indication where this might lead, but the only thing to do was to get out of here and make that phone call. And quick. Druce was bringing in more people, junk-brokers, whatever they were. Any action that he took would have to be done before they returned.

Even as Jon followed this train of logic his fingers were busy. Palming a wrench, he was swiftly loosening the main retaining nut on his hip joint. It dropped free in his hand, only the pivot pin remained now to hold his leg on. He climbed slowly to his feet and moved towards Coleman's desk.

"Mr. Coleman, sir, it's time to go down to the ship now, should I leave now, sir?"

Jon spoke the words slowly as he walked forward, apparently going to the door, but angling at the same time towards the plump man's desk.

"You got thirty minutes yet, go sit—say...!"

The words were cut off. Fast as a human reflex is, it is the barest crawl compared to the lightning action of electronic reflex. At the instant Coleman was first aware of Jon's motion, the robot had finished his leap and lay sprawled across the desk, his leg off at the hip and clutched in his hand.

"YOU'LL KILL YOURSELF IF YOU TOUCH THE BUTTON!"

The words were part of the calculated plan. Jon bellowed them in the startled man's ear as he stuffed the dismembered leg down the front of the man's baggy slacks. It had the desired effect, Coleman's finger stabbed at the button but stopped before it made contact. He stared down with bulging eyes at the little black box of death peeping out of his waistband.

Jon hadn't waited for the reaction. He pushed backward from the desk and stopped to grab the stolen pinch bar off the floor. A mighty one-legged leap brought him to the locked closet; he stabbed the bar into the space between the door and frame and heaved.

Coleman was just starting to struggle the bomb out of his pants when the action was over. The closet open, Jon seized the heavy strap holding the second bomb on the rummy's chest and snapped it like a thread. He threw the bomb into Coleman's corner, giving the man one more thing to worry about. It had cost him a leg, but Jon had escaped the bomb threat without injuring a human. Now he had to get to a phone and make that call.

Coleman stopped tugging at the bomb and plunged his hand into the desk drawer for a gun. The returning men would block the door soon, the only other exit from the room was a frosted-glass window that opened onto the mammoth bay of the warehouse.

Jon Venex plunged through the window in a welter of flying glass. The heavy thud of a recoilless .75 came from the room behind him and a foot-long section of metal window frame leaped outward. Another slug screamed by the robot's head as he scrambled toward the rear door of the warehouse.

He was a bare thirty feet away from the back entrance when the giant door hissed shut on silent rollers. All the doors would have closed at the same time, the thud of running feet indicated that they would be guarded as well. Jon hopped a section of packing cases and crouched out of sight.
He looked up over his head, there stretched a webbing of steel supports, crossing and recrossing until they
joined the flat expanse of the roof. To human eyes the shadows there deepened into obscurity, but the infra-red from
a network of steam pipes gave Jon all the illumination he needed.

The men would be quartering the floor of the warehouse soon, his only chance to escape recapture or death
would be over their heads. Besides this, he was hampered by the loss of his leg. In the rafters he could use his arms
for faster and easier travel.

Jon was just pulling himself up to one of the topmost cross beams when a hoarse shout from below was
followed by a stream of bullets. They tore through the thin roof, one slug clanged off the steel beam under his body.
Waiting until three of the newcomers had started up a nearby ladder, Jon began to quietly work his way towards the
back of the building.

Safe for the moment, he took stock of his position. The men were spread out through the building, it could only
be a matter of time before they found him. The doors were all locked and—he had made a complete circuit of the
building to be sure—there were no windows that he could force—the windows were bolted as well. If he could call
the emergency operator the unknown friends of Venex 17 might come to his aid. This, however, was out of the
question. The only phone in the building was on Coleman's desk. He had traced the leads to make sure.

His eyes went automatically to the cables above his head. Plastic gaskets were set in the wall of the building,
through them came the power and phone lines. The phone line! That was all he needed to make a call.

With smooth, fast motions he reached up and scratched a section of wire bare. He laughed to himself as he
slipped the little microphone out of his left ear. Now he was half deaf as well as half lame—he was literally giving
himself to this cause. He would have to remember the pun to tell Alec Diger later, if there was a later. Alec had a
profound weakness for puns.

Jon attached jumpers to the mike and connected them to the bare wire. A touch of the ammeter showed that no
one was on the line. He waited a few moments to be sure he had a dial tone then sent the eleven carefully spaced
pulses that would connect him with the local operator. He placed the mike close to his mouth.

"Hello, operator. Hello, operator. I cannot hear you so do not answer. Call the emergency operator—signal 14, I
repeat—signal 14."

Jon kept repeating the message until the searching men began to approach his position. He left the mike
connected—the men wouldn't notice it in the dark but the open line would give the unknown powers his exact
location. Using his fingertips he did a careful traverse on an I-beam to an alcove in the farthest corner of the room.
Escape was impossible, all he could do was stall for time.

"Mr. Coleman, I'm sorry I ran away." With the volume on full his voice rolled like thunder from the echoing
walls.

He could see the men below twisting their heads vainly to find the source.

"If you let me come back and don't kill me I will do your work. I was afraid of the bomb, but now I am afraid
of the guns." It sounded a little infantile, but he was pretty sure none of those present had any sound knowledge of
robotic intelligence.

"Please let me come back ... sir!" He had almost forgotten the last word, so he added another "Please, sir!" to
make up.

Coleman needed that package under the boat very badly, he would promise anything to get it. Jon had no
doubts as to his eventual fate, all he could hope to do was kill time in the hopes that the phone message would bring
aid.

"Come on down, Junky, I won't be mad at you—if you follow directions." Jon could hear the hidden anger in
his voice, the unspoken hatred for a robe who dared lay hands on him.

The descent wasn't difficult, but Jon did it slowly with much apparent discomfort. He hopped into the center of
the floor—leaning on the cases as if for support. Coleman and Druce were both there as well as a group of hard-eyed
newcomers. They raised their guns at his approach but Coleman stopped them with a gesture.

"This is my robe, boys, I'll see to it that he's happy."

He raised his gun and shot Jon's remaining leg off. Twisted around by the blast, Jon fell helplessly to the floor.
He looked up into the smoking mouth of the .75.

"Very smart for a tin-can, but not smart enough. We'll get the junk on the boat some other way, some way that
won't mean having you around under foot." Death looked out of his narrowed eyes.

Less than two minutes had passed since Jon's call. The watchers must have been keeping 24 hour stations
waiting for Venex 17's phone message.

The main door went down with the sudden scream of torn steel. A whippet tank crunched over the wreck and
covered the group with its multiple pom-poms. They were an instant too late, Coleman pulled the trigger.

Jon saw the tensing trigger finger and pushed hard against the floor. His head rolled clear but the bullet tore
through his shoulder. Coleman didn't have a chance for a second shot, there was a fizzling hiss from the tank and the riot ports released a flood of tear gas. The stricken men never saw the gas-masked police that poured in from the street.

Jon lay on the floor of the police station while a tech made temporary repairs on his leg and shoulder. Across the room Venex 17 was moving his new body with evident pleasure.

"Now this really feels like something! I was sure my time was up when that land slip caught me. But maybe I ought to start from the beginning." He stamped across the room and shook Jon's inoperable hand.

"The name is Wil Counter-4951L3, not that that means much any more. I've worn so many different bodies that I forget what I originally looked like. I went right from factory-school to a police training school—and I have been on the job ever since—Force of Detectives, Sergeant Jr. grade, Investigation Department. I spend most of my time selling candy bars or newspapers, or serving drinks in crumb joints. Gather information, make reports and keep tab on guys for other departments.

"This last job—and I'm sorry I had to use a Venex identity, I don't think I brought any dishonor to your family—I was on loan to the Customs department. Seems a ring was bringing uncut junk—heroin—into the country. F.B.I. tabbed all the operators here, but no one knew how the stuff got in. When Coleman, he's the local big-shot, called the agencies for an underwater robot, I was packed into a new body and sent running.

"I alerted the squad as soon as I started the tunnel, but the damned thing caved in on me before I found out what ship was doing the carrying. From there on you know what happened.

"Not knowing I was out of the game the squad sat tight and waited. The hop merchants saw a half million in snow sailing back to the old country so they had you dragged in as a replacement. You made the phone call and the cavalry rushed in at the last moment to save two robots from a rusty grave."

Jon, who had been trying vainly to get in a word, saw his chance as Wil Counter turned to admire the reflection of his new figure in a window.

"You shouldn't be telling me those things—about your police investigations and department operations. Isn't this information supposed to be secret? Specially from robots!"

"Of course it is!" was Wil's airy answer. "Captain Edgecombe—he's the head of my department—is an expert on all kinds of blackmail. I'm supposed to tell you so much confidential police business that you'll have to either join the department or be shot as a possible informer." His laughter wasn't shared by the bewildered Jon.

"Truthfully, Jon, we need you and can use you. Robes that can think fast and act fast aren't easy to find. After hearing about the tricks you pulled in that warehouse, the Captain swore to decapitate me permanently if I couldn't get you to join up. Do you need a job? Long hours, short pay—but guaranteed to never get boring."

Wil's voice was suddenly serious. "You saved my life, Jon—those snowbirds would have left me in that sandpile until all hell froze over. I'd like you for a mate, I think we could get along well together." The gay note came back into his voice, "And besides that, I may be able to save your life some day—I hate owing debts."

The tech was finished, he snapped his tool box shut and left. Jon's shoulder motor was repaired now, he sat up. When they shook hands this time it was a firm clasp. The kind you know will last awhile.

Jon stayed in an empty cell that night. It was gigantic compared to the hotel and barrack rooms he was used to. He wished that he had his missing legs so he could take a little walk up and down the cell. He would have to wait until the morning. They were going to fix him up then before he started the new job.

He had recorded his testimony earlier and the impossible events of the past day kept whirling around in his head. He would think about it some other time, right now all he wanted to do was let his overworked circuits cool down, if he only had something to read, to focus his attention on. Then, with a start, he remembered the booklet. Everything had moved so fast that the earlier incident with the truck driver had slipped his mind completely.

He carefully worked it out from behind the generator shielding and opened the first page of Robot Slaves in a World Economy. A card slipped from between the pages and he read the short message on it.

PLEASE DESTROY THIS CARD AFTER READING

If you think there is truth in this book and would like to hear more, come to Room B, 107 George St. any Tuesday at 5 P.M.

The card flared briefly and was gone. But he knew that it wasn't only a perfect memory that would make him remember that message.

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PRELUDE TO SPACE
By Robert W. Haseltine

You're certain to be included in a survey at one time or another. However, there's one you may not recognize as such. Chances are it will be more important than you imagine. It could be man's--

I was climbing the steep side of a central Wisconsin hill, holding my bow away from my body for balance, when I first saw the stranger. He sat on a stump at the crest and watched me struggle up. As I drew nearer I panted out a greeting and received his cheerful "Hi" in return. When I finally reached the top, I threw myself on the ground and began catching my breath.

He didn't say anything at first, just looked at the bow and the quiver of arrows on my back. Finally he said, "May I look at it?" and reached for the bow. I handed it to him. He examined it carefully and returned it.

"Beautiful workmanship. Is that all you use?" he asked.

"I never cared much for guns," I answered. "I've always thought a bow gave the animal more of an even chance for his life."

We talked then on the various aspects of hunting and how the crisp fall air seemed to make the deer seem closer than during the heat of summer. While we talked I tried to place the reason he disturbed me, but I couldn't seem to do it. He was dressed in an old plaid shirt and dungarees and his blond hair wasn't many shades removed from my own straw thatch. But there was something odd about him that I couldn't quite find.

"Perhaps it's the cloth." His words surprised me. "You see, it hasn't been discovered on this planet as yet." My face must have shown astonishment because he went on in the same vein. "I admit it's confusing, but it's also true. My clothes weren't made on Earth." He chuckled then, deep in his throat. "I don't blame you for being confused. I know how I would feel if I met an extraterrestrial being before space travel was a reality."

I kept staring at him. Finally I blurted out, "What in Sam Hill are you talking about?"

He leaned forward on the stump and his face grew earnest. "You might say I'm a poll taker. I have to decide certain things from various interviews with individuals I meet."

"What are you trying to prove?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that until I'm finished with the interview. If I told you, your interest in the subject would tend to prejudice your answers."

"Fair enough. What do you want to ask me?"

He pulled out a notebook and smiled. "These questions may seem a little silly but I must have straight answers to them. Will you go along with me?"

I nodded my head.

"Let's see now. If you were the head of a government and wanted to ascertain whether another country was ready for admission into the United Nations, what would you do?"

I shrugged. "I suppose I would read books and magazines from the country and possibly have an interview with the heads of the government. After I had collected my data I could then act upon it."

"For the sake of argument suppose the books and other periodicals were written so as to be prejudicial in favor of the government, and the heads also were coloring what they said."

I thought for a minute. "In that case I suppose I would secretly place someone inside the country to interview and observe. They would bring back the information needed to ascertain whether they would be an asset or a detriment to the organization."

"Yes, the people themselves and the conditions they live in will give you the needed data." He turned a page in the book. "Now suppose that you wished to know if a certain planet was ready to enter into an organization such as the Galactic Federation, what would you do?"

"I suppose I'd act as I did before. Place people inside the various areas of the planet to interview and observe. They would bring back the information needed to ascertain whether they would be an asset or a detriment to the organization."

"That's all right," I said, "then we can exchange culture and knowledge with other civilizations."
"Yes, if you are eligible to join."
"But you said that once we reach space we will be eligible."
"Look at it this way," he said. "The main purpose of the Galactic Federation is to promote peace and understanding among the various planets. Earth would have to be prepared to take its place as just another member, and not an important member at that. Earth, you see, is one of the smaller planets and also would be the latest one to join.

"In times past some planets have reached space without being fully prepared for what they would find. They still had internal troubles on their own worlds. We had to place them in quarantine until they reached that degree of civilization where they were ready to live in peace. Now we check a planet before it reaches the space-travel stage. We find out the reactions of the inhabitants to certain situations."
"What sort of situations?" I asked.
"Well, naturally we want to see their artifacts as an indication as to their advancement. We have to know what the average man thinks of space travel and trade with other planets. And their ideas on peace and their feelings towards their fellow men. All are very important.

"Actually, when a planet once enters the Federation the people are the ones to decide on peace and war. So if the majority of the people on a planet are peace-loving that planet is ready to enter the Federation."
"But how do you find out all these things?" I asked. "When a man finds out what you are trying to prove he may lie because he wants to get into space."

His eyes held a mischievous glint as he answered. "Simple, the art of telepathy has been highly developed among my race. I have your thoughts on everything I've mentioned. Later, when all the data from thousands of similar interviews is in it will be evaluated and the decision made as to whether your world will be allowed to reach space. We have the means of keeping you from it if we decide you aren't yet ready."

He stood up and I followed suit. "I must be going now," he sighed. "This work keeps me on the run and I have many more interviews to make. Believe me, it was a pleasure meeting you. I hope we meet again—later." We shook hands and he strolled over the hill into the valley.

Perhaps I should have followed him, but it wouldn't have done any good, really. Because a few moments later I saw something shimmering over the top of the hill. It was big and disc-shaped and shot into the sky with a speed that was unbelievable.

I still don't know what to think about him or what we talked about. I'm going to keep watching the papers though, and hoping he got the right answers. If we reach the Moon I'll know he did....

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TIGHT SQUEEZE
BY DEAN C. ING

He knew the theory of repairing the gizmo all right. He had that nicely taped. But there was the little matter of threading a wire through a too-small hole while under zero-g, and working in a spacesuit!

MacNamara ambled across the loading ramp, savoring the dry, dusty air that smelled unmistakable of spaceship. He half-consciously separated the odors; the sweet, volatile scent of fuel, the sharp aroma of lingering exhaust gases from early morning test-firing, the delicate odor of silicon plastic which was being stowed as payload. He shielded his eyes against the sun, watching as men struggled with the last plastic girders to be strapped down, high above the dazzling ground of White Sands. The slender cargo doors stood open around Valier's girth, awaiting his own personal O.K.

This flight would be the fourth for Major Edward MacNamara; as he neared the great, squatting shock absorbers he could feel the tension begin to knot his stomach. He had, of course, been overwhelmed by the opportunity to participate in Operation Doughnut. The fact that he had been one of the best mechanical engineers in the Air Force never occurred to him at the time. He was a pilot, and a good one, but he had languished as C.O. of a maintenance squadron for nearly two years before he was given another crack at glory. Now, he wasn't at all sure he was happy with the transition. They needed master mechanics for Operation Doughnut, but he felt they should be left on the ground when the towering supply rockets lifted.

He stopped, leaning against scaffolding as he saw a familiar figure turn toward him. He cupped his hands before his face.
"Hey, douse that butt! Can't you ... oh, Mac!" The commanding voice trailed off in a chuckle. Better to clown
his way through the inspection, MacNamara thought, than to let Ruiz notice his nervousness. The co-pilot, Ruiz, walked toward him, still smiling. "One of these days, boy, you gonna go too far. Thought you were a real, eighteen carat saboteur." He clapped MacNamara on the shoulder and gazed aloft. "Good day for it. No weather, no hangover, no nothing."

"Yeah. You know, Johnny, I've been thinking about a modification for our breathing oxy." He sniffed appreciatively.

"What's that?"

"Put a little dust in it, a few smells. That stuff we breathe is just too sanitary!"

"I know what you mean. I sure begin to crave this filthy, germ-filled air after a few hours out there." They both smiled at the thought, then turned to the business at hand.

"By the way, Johnny, what're you doing out so early? Didn't expect to see you cabbies before ten."

"I donno," the bronzed Ruiz replied. "Went to bed early, woke up at six and couldn't drop off again. And here I am. Carl ought to be along around nine-thirty. Thought I'd help you preflight, if you want me to."

"Sure." He wanted nothing of the sort, but had the tact not to say so.

Edward MacNamara was as familiar with the Valier as he was with the tip of his nose. He had been on the scene when Dan Burke test-hopped the third stage, had made improvements and re-routing jobs, and had memorized every serial number of every bearing that went into Valier. As Flight Engineer, he was supposed to.

With Johnny Ruiz helping a little and hindering a little, he finished his tour of the cargo sections and grinned his approval to a muscular loading technician. "They can button her up, sergeant. I couldn't do a better job myself."

It was a compliment of the highest order, and they both knew it.

Riding the tiny lift down to ground level, MacNamara stopped them every ten feet or so to circle the catwalks. He noticed Ruiz's impatience about halfway down. "No hurry, Johnny. I don't want another Wyld on our hands." He knew he shouldn't have said it, but it slipped out anyway. Everyone tried to forget the Wyld disaster, particularly the flight personnel. The Wyld, one of the first ships to be built, had made only two orbits before being destroyed. Observers stated that a cargo hatch had somehow swung open when the Wyld was only a thousand feet in the air. At any rate, the pilot reported damage to one second-stage fin and tried to brake his way down. The Wyld settled beautifully, tilted, then fell headlong. The resultant explosion caused such destruction that, had there not been a number of men in orbit and waiting for supplies, the project might have been halted, "temporarily." It was generally conceded that a more thorough preflight could have prevented the Wyld's immolation.

Ruiz was noticeably quieter during the remainder of the inspection. The external check completed, MacNamara strapped a small flashlight to his wrist and began the internal inspection, jokingly called the autopsy.

An hour and over a hundred and fifty feet later, MacNamara wheezed as he swung over the bulkhead at the base of Valier's third and top stage. His aching limbs persuaded him to take a breather. After all, his complete inspection of the day before really made a final preflight unnecessary, and passing near the frigid oxygen tanks was a day's work in itself. He listened to the innumerable noises around and below him. The clicks and hums near him meant that Ruiz, having given up following him, was checking out the flight controls, with power on only in the top stage. From below came a vibrational rushing noise, nearly subsonic, which told him of the fueling operation. He thought of the electrical relays governing the fuel input and shuddered. He violently disliked the idea of having hot wires near fuel of any kind, and rocket fuel in particular.

MacNamara swept his light over his wrist watch. Fifteen after. Logan should be along soon, he thought, and hastened to finish checking the conduits, servos, pumps and hydraulic actuators below the cabin level. This done, he crawled up the final ladder to the cabin, or "dome."

"Well," cried a cheerful voice, "if it isn't our grimy Irishman."

MacNamara shook the sweat from his brow and muttered, "Irishman, is it? How about 'Logan'? That's a good Scandinavian name."

"How about Logan? He's great, as usual. Just look at me, Mac. What a specimen!" Logan, the inevitable optimist, bounced out of his acceleration couch and spread his arms wide as if to show the world what a superman he, Carl Logan, was. The gesture and its intimations made MacNamara smile. Logan wasn't much over five feet tall, and his flight suit made him look like a bald pussycat. His small physique covered a fantastic set of reflexes, however, and Logan's sense of humor was a quality of utmost importance. He hadn't an enemy in the world. His enemy was out of this world by definition; Logan wanted to conquer space and, so far, was doing just that.

"O.K., O.K. Laugh. Just remember this, Gargantua; I may not be tall, but I sure am skinny." MacNamara smiled again, nodding agreement. "Well, don't everybody talk at once. How is she, Mac?"

"With luck," answered MacNamara, "we might get ten feet off the turf." He paused for effect. "Seriously, Carl, she never looked better. You could take her up right now. Say, where's Johnny? I thought you'd just be checking in to the medics; looks like everybody's early today."
"He's probably over in some corner, making out his will. He was down below a while ago with a face a mile long."

Probably, thought Mac, he's still thinking about the Wyld. Why did I have to bring that up? Aloud, he said, "I ought to check the ground crew. Did you bring the forms?"

"Nope. Just my magnificent self. If anything had gone astray, they'd have told you."

"All the same, I think I'll go down and question the troops. Don't leave without me." He clambered out onto the catwalk, leaving the air lock open. The sun was riding higher every minute. In a little over an hour, he'd be a thousand miles away—vertically. The knot in his stomach began to form again. He wasn't scared, exactly; he kept telling himself "excited" was a nicer word.

The inspection forms signed, Mac held a short interrogation with the crew chief. The grizzled lieutenant, commissioned because of his long experience and responsibilities, gave Valier a clean bill of health. Each engine of the booster stage had been fired separately, before dawn. A cubic foot of mercury seemed to roll from Mac's shoulders as he saw Logan and Ruiz lounging at the bottom of the lift; there wasn't anything to worry about. He recalled feeling the tension before the other three flights, then chided himself. Ya, ya, scared-y cat. Well, why not? It's a helluva risk every time you make a shot, in spite of all the propaganda. Hooey; if you didn't know everything's O.K., you wouldn't be getting ready to make the shot. Yeah, but you never can tell——He stopped his inward battle and forced some spring into his step as he moved toward Logan and Ruiz.

"I've tried my best to abort this big bug, but I can't find anything amiss."


Mac knew without asking that Logan, for all his apparent indifference, had painstakingly gone over every phase of the flight, checking distribution, radar, final instructions from Operations, weather, et al. Ruiz, as usual, watched and took notes as Logan gathered data.

At minus fifteen minutes, the trio was in the dome, checking personal equipment, while outside, the scaffolding ponderously slid away, section by section.

There was little time for soliloquies of to go, or not to go; within the quarter-hour, Captain Ruiz and Majors MacNamara and Logan would be in readiness for the final count-down. With the emergency bail-out equipment checked, the men busied themselves on another continuity test of the myriad circuits spread like a human neural system throughout the ship. All relays, servo systems and instrument leads were in perfect condition as expected, and the trio was settled comfortably in acceleration couches with minutes to spare.

Logan contacted Ground Control a few seconds after the minus-three minute signal, informing all and sundry that Gridley could fire when ready. MacNamara sighed, thinking that if Logan's humor wasn't exactly original, it was surely tenacious.

The ship was brought to dim half-life at minus one minute by Logan's agile fingers, and as the final countdown rasped in his headset, Mac felt his innards wrestle among themselves.

Valier bellowed her enthusiasm suddenly, lifting her eight thousand-odd tons from the ground almost instantly. Inside, her occupants grimaced helplessly as they watched various instruments guide tiny pointers across calibrated faces. Mac's throat mike threatened to crush his Adam's apple, weighing five times its usual few ounces. Of his senses, sound was the one that dominated him; an intolerable, continuous explosion from the motors racked his mind like tidal waves of formic acid. He forced himself to overcome the numbness which his brain cast up to defend itself. Then, as quickly as it had begun, Valier fell deafeningly silent; that meant Mach 1 was passed.

It was an eternity before stage one separated. The loss of the empty hulk was hardly felt as Valier streaked high over the Texas border. Ruiz, watching the radarscope, saw Lubbock slide into focus miles below. Next stop, Fort Worth, he thought. I used to drive that in five hours. The jagged line of the caprock told him they were well on their way to Fort Worth already.

The altimeter showed slightly over forty-two miles when stage two detached itself. Logan, in constant contact with White Sands, was informed that they were tracking perfectly as Valier arrowed over central Texas toward rendezvous at the doughnut. The exhausted lower stages were forgotten now; only the second stage was of any concern anyway. The radar boys tracked it all the way down, ready to detonate it high in the air if its huge 'chutes wafted it near any inhabited community.

The motors of stage three blasted for a carefully calculated few seconds, then cut out automatically. With the destitution of his weight, Mac felt his spirits soar also. They were almost in orbit, now, climbing at a slight angle with a velocity sufficient to carry them around Earth forever, a streamlined, tiny satellite.

After the first few moments of disorientation, rocket crews found that a weightless condition gave them, ambiguously, a buoyant feeling. Only the doughnut crew had really adapted to this condition, living as they did without the effects of gravity for hours at a time every day. The temporary "housing" was rotated for comfort of the
crews during rest periods, but while moving the plates and girders of the giant doughnut into place, they had no such
luxuries. For these men, weightlessness became an integral part of their activities, but the rocket crews were
subjected to this phenomenon only during the few hours needed to rendezvous, unload the cargo, and coast back
after another initial period of acceleration.

Hence, Mac felt a strange elation when he tapped his fingers on the arm of his couch and saw his arm float
upward, due to reaction from the tap.

Against all regulations, Logan unstrapped himself and motioned his comrades to do the same. This unorthodox
seventh-inning stretch was prohibited because it left the pilot's arm-rest controls without an operator, hence could
prove disastrous if, through some malfunction, the ship should veer off course.

The autopilot functioned perfectly, however, and Logan trusted it to the point of insouciance. The three men
lounged in midair, grinning foolishly as they "swam" about the tiny cabin. No more satisfying stretch was ever
enjoyed.

A few minutes of this was enough. Ruiz was the first to gingerly pull himself into his couch and his
companions followed. Not a word had passed between them, since they were at all times in contact with monitor
stations spaced across the world below. The first time they had enjoyed this irregular horseplay, on the second trip,
Logan had made the mistake of saying, "Race you to the air lock!", and was hard put to explain those words. Nor
could Logan switch to "intercom only," since a sudden radio silence would create anxiety below. Only their heavy
breathing would indicate unusual activity to Earthside.

They were nearing the intercept point, a thousand miles above the Atlantic, when they realized their
predicament.

"I'm in a fix, Carl," said Ruiz, meaning that he had tentatively fixed a position of intercept. "Correct our
elevation; we're point-nine degrees high."

"Right-o. Correction in five seconds from my mark—mark!"

For slight corrections in the flight path, small steering motors were utilized. These motors were located near the
rear lip of Valier's conical cargo section on retractable booms. Extension of the motors with no resultant air friction
gave a longer pivot arm and consequently better efficiency. Mac pressed the "Aux. Steer" stud and immediately
three amber lights winked on in their respective instrument consoles.

Carl Logan fired the twelve o'clock motor briefly—only it didn't fire. The change in momentum wouldn't be
much in any case, but it was always perceptible by feel and by instrument. There was no change.

Logan tried the firing circuit again, and again. Still Valier streaked along, now miles above the intended point
of intercept. By this time, the embryo space station was quite near, sailing along in the 'scope beneath them. It
slowly moved toward the top of the 'scope, passing Valier in its slightly higher relative velocity.

"We've got troubles, Mac—find 'em!" Logan had finally lost the devil-may-care attitude, but that fact was small
consolation to MacNamara.

"Keep your mitts off those firing studs, Carl," he growled, unstrapping himself quickly. The malfunction was
definitely in the auxiliary motor setup, he thought. A common trouble? It wouldn't pay to find out. If the other
motors fired, it would only throw them farther off-course. If worst came to worst, they could roll Valier over and use
the six o'clock auxiliary; there was a small arc through which the motors could turn on their mounts. But the trouble
was unknown, and they might end up rifling or pinwheeling if they didn't let bad enough alone.

During his mental trouble-shooting, Mac was busily worming his bulk into a balloonish-looking suit identical
to those worn by the doughnut's construction crew. Ruiz gave him some aid, helping him thrust his arms past the
spring-folded elbow joints. For some reason, the legs gave less trouble. Within a fumbling few moments, he was
ready for work.

He glanced at Logan through his visor, feeling a vicious pleasure over the beads of sweat on Logan's forehead.
Time he sweated a little, thought the mechanic.

A final check of his headset followed, after which Mac oozed into the Lilliputian air lock at the bottom, now
rear, wall of the cabin. He nodded to Ruiz, who secured the air lock, then adjusted his suit control to force a little
pressure into his suit. Gradually the suit became livable. Then he cracked the other air-lock valve and allowed
pressure to leak out around him.

His suit puffed out with soft popping noises and Mac heard the last vestige of air hiss out of the chamber. He
found the hatchway too tight for comfort and had a moment of fear when his tool pack caught in the orifice,
wedging him neatly. He could hear Logan and Ruiz through his earphones, explaining their plight to Ground
Control. They wanted to know why in blue blazes Valier hadn't contacted the doughnut when it came within range,
and Logan had no defense save preoccupation with his own plight. Belatedly, Ruiz made radio contact with the
doughnut, which was still well within range. All this time, Mac busied himself with his inspection light, tracing the
electrical leads to the small, turbine operated auxiliary motor fuel pumps.
“Mac?” Logan’s voice startled him. “Can you brace yourself? I’m going to try to match velocities with the doughnut. Won’t take over one ‘g’ for a few seconds.”

“Wait a minute.” He looked wildly about him. Valier hadn’t been built with a view toward stowaways; and every cubic inch of space was crammed with something, except for the passageway with its ladder, leading up from the main motor section. Well, if it wasn’t over a “g,” he could hang on to the ladder. Suit weighs another fifty pounds, though. My weight plus fifty, he thought. “Give me a chance to get set,” he said aloud. He hooked one bulbous leg over a ladder rung and braced the other against a lower rung, hugging the ladder with both arms. “Any time you say, but kill it if you hear me holler!”

“Then five seconds from my mark—mark!” Mac tightened his grip, and then sagged backward as the main motors fired. The vibrations shook him slightly but deeply, and he fought to keep his hold. He felt his back creak and pop with the sudden surge of weight. Then the motors shut off, and Mac skidded several feet up the ladder. No matter how fast a man’s reactions were, they couldn’t be applied quickly enough to keep him from starting an involuntary leap after bracing against a suddenly removed gravity load. “All over, Mac. You O.K.?”

“Guess so, but I feel like a ping-pong ball. How’re we sittin’?”

“Just fine,” Ruiz cut in. “Find anything?”

“Not yet.” Mac started his search anew. Everything seemed in perfect order up to the turbine pumps. Then, he feared, the trouble was near the little motors. That was tough, really tough. With the motors retracted it was next to impossible to get to them, past their hydraulically operated booms and actuators. Extended, he’d have to go outside. He cringed from the thought, although he knew that there was little to fear if he linked himself to the ship.

He peered along the beam of light, searching for some telltale discoloration in wiring, or a gleaming icy patch which would indicate a fuel leak. “Might be the firing plugs,” he muttered.

“Let’s hope not. Where are you, Mac? Maybe you better give us a blow-by-blow.” Logan sounded worried.

“Good idea. Right now I’m at the nine o’clock actuator. Nothing so far.” He looked around himself, forgetting for the moment how he was supposed to get past the equipment to the other auxiliary motor stations.

“Johnny,” he said slowly, “I think you’d best break out the tapes. Auxiliary motor system; you’ll find them under power plant.” Months before, MacNamara had made a complete set of tape recordings of his own voice, recorded as he made a thorough-going rundown of every system and its components. This was a personal innovation which his fellow flight engineers considered folly. Extra weight, they scoffed. Undue complication. Mac nodded and went on with his impromptu speechmaking; a professional psychiatrist might have said, correctly, that Mac felt an unconscious need for supervision, a forgivable deficiency dating back to his cadet days. Mac simply claimed that the best of men could forget or omit when alone with a few million dollars’ worth of Uncle’s equipment. This way he could remind himself of each step to be taken ahead of time, in his own way.

The co-pilot rushed to comply. Mac, waiting, suddenly remembered how to get past his obstacle. Internal braces which helped keep the tanks rigidly in place on Earth were of little use while in “freeloading,” or gravity-less, state. The braces were removable, and Mac had loosened a single wing-nut to let the brace swing loose when he heard Johnny Ruiz’s answer.

“Ready with your tape, Mac. Where shall I start it?”

“Run it through ‘til you get to a blank spot, then another, then stop it.” He was certain he didn’t really need the tape, but it was a maintenance aid and he was determined to use it.

He heard a click, then a hum, as the recorder was jacked into his headset circuit. Immediately, a familiar voice began a slow dissertation on power leads from the dome, speeded up in the space of a second or two to a high-pitched alien gibberish, then to a faint scream. He began squirming around the turbine tanks, got past the first brace, and turned to attach it again. Of course it wasn’t necessary, but—“PLAY IT SAFE” was embroidered on his brain by years of maintenance experience; back in his old maintenance squadron, he’d been called “the old lady” instead of "the old man," due to his insistence on precautions.

Ruiz slowed the tape suddenly, on cue, and Mac heard himself saying, "... Brace back in its slot and pin it. Be careful of those linkages on the turbine pumps. Now crawl around to the next brace and unpin it." Pause, scraping noises, and a muttered oath. "Pin sticks, but it won’t without a load on it." It didn’t.

He worked slower than he had on the ground, fumbling with the heavy gloves and cursing mightily. His voice rambled on, warning him of obstacles and reminding him about minor points that could give trouble. He listened carefully, discarding each suggestion.

Floating near the twelve o’clock auxiliary, Mac peered at each tubing connection, tugging and twisting. "Wait a minute," he said. His light flashed out at the motor, riding perched on its swivel, limned against cold, hard points of light that were the stars. His heart gave a bound. "I think I’ve found it!" His other voice droned on morbidly. “Turn that thing off a minute, Johnny. Listen; there’s a lead to the twelve o’clock fuel valve solenoid that looks like ... yes, I’m sure of it. It’s pulled away from a bracket and looks like it might be charred.” Mac twisted around to view the
wiring better.
"Can you fix it?"

"Oh, sure, if that's all there is wrong. But I'd rather do the work with the motors retracted. Tell you what; retract them about forty-five degrees when I give the word."

Mac judged the distance the booms would cover during semiretraction and half floated, half crawled out of the way. He found himself breathing heavily, despite the freeload conditions. His suit was simply too cumbersome. The thought came to him that he didn't even know how long he'd been out of the dome. His breathing oxygen gauge showed half empty, so he must have been on the job for around a half hour. He rationed his supply a bit, hoping he could finish the job without a refill.

"O.K., Johnny, you can run the tape again. And retract the motors while you're at it." He heard the tape start again on its course, watching the booms.

They leaped inward, then, and Mac felt a crushing blow across his back. He shook his head groggily and yelled. He tried to scramble from his place between motor and turbine fuel lines without success; he was trapped like a wild animal by the heavy actuator which had swung past his head. He heard himself say, "And be sure to stay clear of the actuator. It swings through a ninety-degree arc when it's operated."

"Oh, shut up! I know it; I just judged it wrong." The tape moved on unperturbedly, reminding him to inspect the actuator bearings and extension rods.

"Mac," came Logan's voice, "you might try to hurry it. If you can't get it fixed in an hour or two, we'll have to try rolling Valier down to the doughnut. But it's up to you, fella. Take your time."

"Well, you might help me a bit by raising this hydraulic unit offa my shoulders. Lucky it didn't squash me."

The actuator stayed where it was. "Johnny! Carl! Do you read me?" No answer. Obviously, the actuator had smashed his transmitter, but left the receiver section intact. Then all he could hope for would be a suspicion from one of the others that all was not well. If they asked him any questions and he failed to reply, they'd figure something was wrong. Well, he couldn't count on that.

He struggled with his vulcanized suit, trying to squeeze from under the actuator. If I'd had them retract it completely, he thought, I'd be a dead man. It was a tight squeeze, but he inched his way out of the trap by using every ounce of strength at his command. If his suit tore, he'd know it in a hurry.

Gasping for breath, Mac drew himself into a crouch and regarded the offending wire. His flashlight still operated, and he could see the heavy insulation which had been scraped away. No charring; then it must have been the extension rods that had scissored through the insulation. The wire hung together by a thread, the strands of metal severed completely. He groped for his tool kit, trying to ignore the voice in his headset.

"Well, that takes care of the actuators. Now for these dinky motors. The swivel mounts have to work without any lubricant, so look for indications of wear and—"

Mac cursed under his breath. He sounded so cocksure, so all-knowing. He felt like beating himself. His earlier self, who had blithely toured Valier trailing the microphone wires without any real premonition of trouble. It always happens to the other guy—Not this time, chum, he reminded himself.

The gloves were systematically foiling his attempts to withdraw the coil of wire at his side. The tool kit was the ultimate in maintenance work, compact and complete with extension handles for the cutters and wrenches. Everything was there, but practically impossible to use. His fingers finally closed over the wire; he jerked it out and with it the splice tool. The little pliers caromed from the brace above him and sailed out toward the motor, beyond the ship. He watched, horrified, as the tool slowly cartwheeled away into space.

"All right," he muttered, "scratch one splice tool. It was also my only pair of pliers, but I'll manage." He knew he could use the wire cutters in a pinch. "In a pinch," he repeated. "Oh, that's a hot one. That's about all that's happened this trip, so far. Pinch me, pinch the wiring—What a pinch!"

Holding the roll of wire tightly in one hand, he grasped the cutters and pulled them from the kit with utmost care. He unrolled a foot-long section of wire and clipped it off, laying his flashlight in the tool kit so that it would shine out in front of him. He managed to attach the tiny splice lugs by pinching them with the cutters, then moved cautiously to the wire which still drooped from the jumble of machinery. "Drooped" wasn't precisely the word; actually the wire had been bent into its position and stayed that way.

As the harried major reached for the brace on which the wire had been bracketed, his tool kit vomited flashlight, wrenches and screwdrivers, leaving him in total darkness. His cursing was regular, now, monotonous and uninspired. There was another pencil light in the kit, snapped tightly to the case, and Mac reached for the whole business. The spare light was a maintenance problem in itself. Question: How to retrieve a fountain pen sized object, when it's held by a small snap and the retriever is encumbered by three pairs of arctic mittens?

Mac saw his errant flashlight out of the corner of his eye, its beam fastened on a collapsed screw driver while both swam sluggishly toward the inspection ladder. He located the pencil light and jerked it loose, holding the short
wire and cutters in his other hand.

This, Mac knew, was the crucial point. If he could splice the wire hanging in front of him, Valier would once
more be in perfect shape. He would have welcomed an extra hand or two, as he straddled a brace and shoved the
tiny flash between his headpiece and shoulder fabric. The wire should be stripped, he knew, but he hadn't the tools.
They were scarcely ten feet from him, but could have rested atop the Kremlin for all the good they did him. He got
most of the strands of one end of wire shoved into a splice lug, and called it good enough. It was like trying to thread
a needle whose eye was deeper than it was wide, while in a diving suit, using the business end of a paintbrush to
start the thread.

He withdrew one hand and searched the kit for friction tape. It might be mentioned that an insulating tape
which would be adhesive at minus two hundred degrees centigrade yet keep its properties at plus one thousand, was
the near culmination of chemical science. Silicon plastic research provided the adhesive, an inert gum which
changed almost none through a fantastic range of temperatures and pressures. The tape Mac used to insure his
connection had an asbestos base, with adhesive gum insinuated into the tape. He wrapped the wire tightly, then
bound it to the brace. He noticed his visor fogging up and felt a faint, giddy sensation. Anoxemia! He let the tape
drift as he reached for his regulator dial. What a fool he was, he thought, to starve his lungs. He turned the dial to
emergency maximum and gulped precious liters of oxygen-helium mixture. The gauge showed a store of the gas
which might possibly be enough to last him, if nothing else went wrong; perhaps ten minutes.

The pencil flash, mercifully, still rested in a fold of his shoulder joint fabric. The insulation tape floated near his
waist; he grabbed it and stowed it between his knee and the brace, then reached once again for the wiring.

This time the splice went on without a hitch. He pinched the splice lug and taped the whole works feverishly. It
was done; he had won. The trip back should take only a couple of minutes. Replacing the wire cutters in his kit, he
held the pencil flash before him and started retracing his route.

He passed the twelve o'clock brace, pinned it in place again and saw one of his tools floating to the right of his
head. He gathered it in and swept his tiny flash around in search of other jetsam from his tool kit. He collected a
wrench and the skittish flashlight, started toward the last brace between him and the ladder, and felt his legs go limp.
He wasn't particularly alarmed about it; his arms and vision failed him too, but his brain hadn't enough incoming
oxygen to care much, one way or the other. The few remaining feet seemed to lengthen into a sewerlike passageway,
then vanished as did all else as his perceptions died.

MacNamara was not the sort to wonder about heaven or hell when he first awoke. He saw a faintly rounded
ceiling, a soft yellow tint accentuating its featurelessness. "How the devil—", he began. His voice failed him.

"Hi, Mac." Logan's beaming face loomed over him. "You rugged character, you. Cold as a pickle an hour ago,
and already you're askin' silly questions." He held up his hand as Mac started to speak. "I hear you thinkin'. 'How the
devil did I get here, and where is here?' In reverse order, this is the most comfortable berth in the doughnut's
facilities, and you got here courtesy of one Johnny Ruiz. Myself, I wouldn't have taken the trouble."

Mac grinned back at his pilot and cleared his throat. "Well, where is he? I wanta shake his hand, or give him
half my kingdom, or something."

"You know Johnny; the shy type. He'll be along after a while. You know, I think he kinda likes you; when you
quit transmitting out there, Johnny was like a cat on a hot skillet. Finally decided to go back and have a look for
himself, but I told him you probably had a hot game of solitaire going. Anyway, he went back and found you asleep
on the job, and lost a good ten pounds getting your fat carcass through the air lock." That was a job that must have
taxed both Ruiz and Logan, but Mac held his silence. "And that was about the size of it. Valier's parked outside with
his emergency vehicle. We'll get you back on the life support system and see what we can do."

Mac swung himself up to a sitting position and realized dizzyly that he was mother-naked. His ribs felt
pulverized. "You guys sure mauled me up," he said accusingly.

"Unavoidable, my dear grease-monkey. You needed a little artificial respiration; I never was too good at that."

"Well, whoever did the job rates a prize of some sort," Mac answered, "but my ribs tell me he had more
enthusiasm than practice."

Logan smiled his old familiar smile, relieved to find his engineer in joking spirits. "The credit again goes to
Johnny. But," he added, "try not to be too hard on him. Try giving artificial respiration to a big lump like yourself
sometime, without any gravity."

Mac digested this tidbit as he pulled on a fresh pair of coveralls. "O.K.," he said, standing on the foamex
"floor."

"Strapped you into your couch face down and locked his legs around it. I didn't dare apply any g's. Come on,"
he finished, "you've managed to upset every timetable in the project. Johnny's shaking like a leaf, or was when I left
him. A bulb of coffee will do us both a world of good."

"I'm sold," Mac grunted, zipping up a flight boot. "But there's something I'd like to do, first chance I get."
"Which is?"
"Which is jettison every last strip of tape I have in Valier. I tell you, Logan," he went on as they entered the
recreation bar, "you'll never know how degrading it is to hear useless, insipid information offered to you when
you're in a tight spot, knowing full well the voice is your own!"

THE END
The mammoths of the ancient world have been wonderfully preserved in the ice of Siberia. The cold, only a few miles out in space, will be far more intense than in the polar regions and its power of preserving the dead body would most probably be correspondingly increased. When the hero-scientist of this story knew he must die, he conceived a brilliant idea for the preservation of his body, the result of which even exceeded his expectations. What, how, and why are cleverly told here.

PROLOGUE

The Rocket Satellite

In the depths of space, some twenty thousand miles from the earth, the body of Professor Jameson within its rocket container cruised upon an endless journey, circling the gigantic sphere. The rocket was a satellite of the huge, revolving world around which it held to its orbit. In the year 1958, Professor Jameson had sought for a plan whereby he might preserve his body indefinitely after his death. He had worked long and hard upon the subject.

Since the time of the Pharaohs, the human race had looked for a means by which the dead might be preserved against the ravages of time. Great had been the art of the Egyptians in the embalming of their deceased, a practice which was later lost to humanity of the ensuing mechanical age, never to be rediscovered. But even the embalming of the Egyptians—so Professor Jameson had argued—would be futile in the face of millions of years, the dissolution of the corpses being just as eventual as immediate cremation following death.

The professor had looked for a means by which the body could be preserved perfectly forever. But eventually he had come to the conclusion that nothing on earth is unchangeable beyond a certain limit of time. Just as long as he sought an earthly means of preservation, he was doomed to disappointment. All earthly elements are composed of atoms which are forever breaking down and building up, but never destroying themselves. A match may be burned, but the atoms are still unchanged, having resolved themselves into smoke, carbon dioxide, ashes, and certain basic elements. It was clear to the professor that he could never accomplish his purpose if he were to employ one system of atomic structure, such as embalming fluid or other concoction, to preserve another system of atomic structure, such as the human body, when all atomic structure is subject to universal change, no matter how slow.

He had then soliloquized upon the possibility of preserving the human body in its state of death until the end of all earthly time—to that day when the earth would return to the sun from which it had sprung. Quite suddenly one day he had conceived the answer to the puzzling problem which obsessed his mind, leaving him awed with its wild, uncanny potentialities.

He would have his body shot into space enclosed in a rocket to become a satellite of the earth as long as the earth continued to exist. He reasoned logically. Any material substance, whether of organic or inorganic origin, cast into the depths of space would exist indefinitely. He had visualized his dead body enclosed in a rocket flying off into the illimitable maw of space. He would remain in perfect preservation, while on earth millions of generations of mankind would live and die, their bodies to molder into the dust of the forgotten past. He would exist in this unchanged manner until that day when mankind, beneath a cooling sun, should fade out forever in the chill, thin atmosphere of a dying world. And still his body would remain intact and as perfect in its rocket container as on that day of the far-gone past when it had left the earth to be hurled out on its career. What a magnificent idea!

At first he had been assailed with doubts. Suppose his funeral rocket landed upon some other planet or, drawn by the pull of the great sun, were thrown into the flaming folds of the incandescent sphere? Then the rocket might continue on out of the solar system, plunging through the endless seas of space for millions of years, to finally enter the solar system of some far-off star, as meteors often enter ours. Suppose his rocket crashed upon a planet, or the star itself, or became a captive satellite of some celestial body?

It had been at this juncture that the idea of his rocket becoming the satellite of the earth had presented itself, and he had immediately incorporated it into his scheme. The professor had figured out the amount of radium necessary to carry the rocket far enough away from the earth so that it would not turn around and crash, and still be not so far away but what the earth's gravitational attraction would keep it from leaving the vicinity of the earth and the solar system. Like the moon, it would forever revolve around the earth.

He had chosen an orbit sixty-five thousand miles from the earth for his rocket to follow. The only fears he had entertained concerned the huge meteors which careened through space at tremendous rates of speed. He had overcome this obstacle, however, and had eliminated the possibilities of a collision with these stellar juggernauts. In the rocket were installed radium repulsion rays which swerved all approaching meteors from the path of the rocket...
as they entered the vicinity of the space wanderer.

The aged professor had prepared for every contingency, and had set down to rest from his labors, reveling in the stupendous, unparalleled results he would obtain. Never would his body undergo decay; and never would his bones bleach to return to the dust of the earth from which all men originally came and to which they must return. His body would remain millions of years in a perfectly preserved state, untouched by the hoary palm of such time as only geologists and astronomers can conceive.

His efforts would surpass even the wildest dreams of H. Rider Haggard, who depicted the wondrous, embalming practices of the ancient nation of Kor in his immortal novel, "She," wherein Holly, under the escort of the incomparable Ayesha, looked upon the magnificent, lifelike masterpieces of embalming by the long-gone peoples of Kor.

With the able assistance of a nephew, who carried out his instructions and wishes following his death, Professor Jameson was sent upon his pilgrimage into space within the rocket he himself had built. The nephew and heir kept the secret forever locked in his heart.

* * * * *

Generation after generation had passed upon its way. Gradually humanity had come to die out, finally disappearing from the earth altogether. Mankind was later replaced by various other forms of life which dominated the globe for their allotted spaces of time before they too became extinct. The years piled up on one another, running into millions, and still the Jameson Satellite kept its lonely vigil around the earth, gradually closing the distance between satellite and planet, yielding reluctantly to the latter's powerful attraction.

Forty million years later, its orbit ranged some twenty thousand miles from the earth while the dead world edged ever nearer the cooling sun whose dull, red ball covered a large expanse of the sky. Surrounding the flaming sphere, many of the stars could be perceived through the earth's thin, rarefied atmosphere. As the earth cut in slowly and gradually toward the solar luminary, so was the moon revolving ever nearer the earth, appearing like a great gem glowing in the twilight sky.

The rocket containing the remains of Professor Jameson continued its endless travel around the great ball of the earth whose rotation had now ceased entirely--one side forever facing the dying sun. There it pursued its lonely way, a cosmic coffin, accompanied by its funeral cortège of scintillating stars amid the deep silence of the eternal space which enshrouded it. Solitary it remained, except for the occasional passing of a meteor flitting by at a remarkable speed on its aimless journey through the vacuum between the far-flung worlds.

Would the satellite follow its orbit to the world's end, or would its supply of radium soon exhaust itself after so many eons of time, converting the rocket into the prey of the first large meteor which chanced that way? Would it some day return to the earth as its nearer approach portended, and increase its acceleration in a long arc to crash upon the surface of the dead planet? And when the rocket terminated its career, would the body of Professor Jameson be found perfectly preserved or merely a crumbled mound of dust?

CHAPTER I

40,000,000 Years After

Entering within the boundaries of the solar system, a long, dark, pointed craft sped across the realms of space towards the tiny point of light which marked the dull red ball of the dying sun which would some day lie cold and dark forever. Like a huge meteor it flashed into the solar system from another chain of planets far out in the illimitable Universe of stars and worlds, heading towards the great red sun at an inconceivable speed.

Within the interior of the space traveler, queer creatures of metal labored at the controls of the space flyer which juggernauted on its way towards the far-off solar luminary. Rapidly it crossed the orbits of Neptune and Uranus and headed sunward. The bodies of these queer creatures were square blocks of a metal closely resembling steel, while for appendages, the metal cube was upheld by four jointed legs capable of movement. A set of six tentacles, all metal, like the rest of the body, curved outward from the upper half of the cubic body. Surfacing it was a queer-shaped head rising to a peak in the center and equipped with a circle of eyes all the way around the head. The creatures, with their mechanical eyes equipped with metal shutters, could see in all directions. A single eye pointed directly upward, being situated in the space of the peaked head, resting in a slight depression of the cranium.

These were the Zoromes of the planet Zor which rotated on its way around a star millions of light years distant from our solar system. The Zoromes, several hundred thousand years before, had reached a stage in science, where they searched for immortality and eternal relief from bodily ills and various deficiencies of flesh and blood anatomy. They had sought freedom from death, and had found it, but at the same time they had destroyed the propensities for birth. And for several hundred thousand years there had been no births and few deaths in the history of the Zoromes.

This strange race of people had built their own mechanical bodies, and by operation upon one another had removed their brains to the metal heads from which they directed the functions and movements of their inorganic
anatomies. There had been no deaths due to worn-out bodies. When one part of the mechanical men wore out, it was replaced by a new part, and so the Zoromes continued living their immortal lives which saw few casualties. It was true that, since the innovation of the machines, there had been a few accidents which had seen the destruction of the metal heads with their brains. These were irreparable. Such cases had been few, however, and the population of Zor had decreased but little. The machine men of Zor had no use for atmosphere, and had it not been for the terrible coldness of space, could have as well existed in the ether void as upon some planet. Their metal bodies, especially their metal-encased brains, did require a certain amount of heat even though they were able to exist comfortably in temperatures which would instantly have frozen to death a flesh-and-blood creature.

The most popular pastime among the machine men of Zor was the exploration of the Universe. This afforded them a never ending source of interest in the discovery of the variegated inhabitants and conditions of the various planets on which they came to rest. Hundreds of space ships were sent out in all directions, many of them being upon their expeditions for hundreds of years before they returned once more to the home planet of far-off Zor.

This particular space craft of the Zoromes had entered the solar system whose planets were gradually circling in closer to the dull red ball of the declining sun. Several of the machine men of the space craft's crew, which numbered some fifty individuals, were examining the various planets of this particular planetary system carefully through telescopes possessing immense power.

These machine men had no names and were indexed according to letters and numbers. They conversed by means of thought impulses, and were neither capable of making a sound vocally nor of hearing one uttered.

"Where shall we go?" queried one of the men at the controls questioning another who stood by his side examining a chart on the wall.

"They all appear to be dead worlds, 4R-3579," replied the one addressed, "but the second planet from the sun appears to have an atmosphere which might sustain a few living creatures, and the third planet may also prove interesting for it has a satellite. We shall examine the inner planets first of all, and explore the outer ones later if we decide it is worth the time."

"Too much trouble for nothing," ventured 9G-721. "This system of planets offers us little but what we have seen many times before in our travels. The sun is so cooled that it cannot sustain the more common life on its planets, the type of life forms we usually find in our travels. We should have visited a planetary system with a brighter sun."

"You speak of common life," remarked 25X-987. "What of the uncommon life? Have we not found life existent on cold, dead planets with no sunlight and atmosphere at all?"

"Yes, we have," admitted 9G-721, "but such occasions are exceedingly rare."

"The possibility exists, however, even in this case," reminded 4R-3579, "and what if we do spend a bit of unprofitable time in this one planetary system--haven't we all an endless lifetime before us? Eternity is ours."

"We shall visit the second planet first of all," directed 25X-987, who was in charge of this particular expedition of the Zoromes, "and on the way there we shall cruise along near the third planet to see what we can of the surface. We may be able to tell whether or not it holds anything of interest to us. If it does, after visiting the second planet, we shall then return to the third. The first world is not worth bothering with."

* * * * *

The space ship from Zor raced on in a direction which would take it several thousand miles above the earth and then on to the planet which we know as Venus. As the space ship rapidly neared the earth, it slackened its speed, so that the Zoromes might examine it closely with their glasses as the ship passed the third planet.

Suddenly, one of the machine men ran excitedly into the room where 25X-987 stood watching the topography of the world beneath him.

"We have found something!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

"Another space ship!"

"Where?"

"But a short distance ahead of us on our course. Come into the foreport of the ship and you can pick it up with the glass."

"Which is the way it's going?" asked 25X-987.

"It is behaving queerly," replied the machine man of Zor. "It appears to be in the act of circling the planet."

"Do you suppose that there really is life on that dead world--intelligent beings like ourselves, and that this is one of their space craft?"

"Perhaps it is another exploration craft like our own from some other world," was the suggestion.

"But not of ours," said 25X-987.

Together, the two Zoromes now hastened into the observation room of the space ship where more of the
machine men were excitedly examining the mysterious space craft, their thought impulses flying thick and fast like bodiless bullets.

"It is very small!"
"Its speed is slow!"
"The craft can hold but few men," observed one.
"We do not yet know of what size the creatures are," reminded another. "Perhaps there are thousands of them in that space craft out there. They may be of such a small size that it will be necessary to look twice before finding one of them. Such beings are not unknown."
"We shall soon overtake it and see."
"I wonder if they have seen us?"
"Where do you suppose it came from?"
"From the world beneath us," was the suggestion.
"Perhaps."

CHAPTER II
The Mysterious Space Craft

The machine men made way for their leader, 25X-987, who regarded the space craft ahead of them critically.

"Have you tried communicating with it yet?" he asked.
"There is no reply to any of our signals," came the answer.
"Come alongside of it then," ordered their commander. "It is small enough to be brought inside our carrying compartment, and we can see with our penetration rays just what manner of creatures it holds. They are intelligent, that is certain, for their space ship does imply as much."

The space flyer of the Zoromes slowed up as it approached the mysterious wanderer of the cosmic void which hovered in the vicinity of the dying world.

"What a queer shape it has," remarked 25X-987. "It is even smaller than I had previously calculated."

A rare occurrence had taken place among the machine men of Zor. They were overcome by a great curiosity which they could not allow to remain unsatiated. Accustomed as they were to witnessing strange sights and still stranger creatures, meeting up with weird adventures in various corners of the Universe, they had now become hardened to the usual run of experiences which they were in the habit of encountering. It took a great deal to arouse their unperturbed attitudes. Something new, however, about this queer space craft had gripped their imaginations, and perhaps a subconscious influence asserted to their minds that here they have come across an adventure radically unusual.

"Come alongside it," repeated 25X-987 to the operator as he returned to the control room and gazed through the side of the space ship in the direction of the smaller cosmic wanderer.

"I'm trying to," replied the machine man, "but it seems to jump away a bit every time I get within a certain distance of it. Our ship seems to jump backward a bit too."

"Are they trying to elude us?"
"I don't know. They should pick up more speed if that is their object."
"Perhaps they are now progressing at their maximum speed and cannot increase their acceleration any more."
"Look!" exclaimed the operator. "Did you just see that? The thing has jumped away from us again!"
"Our ship moved also," said 25X-987. "I saw a flash of light shoot from the side of the other craft as it jumped."

Another machine man now entered and spoke to the commander of the Zorome expedition.

"They are using radium repellent rays to keep us from approaching," he informed.

The man left, and now the machine man at the controls of the craft tried again to close with the mysterious wanderer of the space between planets. The effort was successful, and this time there was no glow of repulsion rays from the side of the long metal cylinder.

They now entered the compartment where various objects were transferred from out the depths of space to the interplanetary craft. Then patiently they waited for the rest of the machine men to open the side of their space ship and bring in the queer, elongated cylinder.

"Put it under the penetration ray!" ordered 25X-987. "Then we shall see what it contains!"

The entire group of Zoromes were assembled about the long cylinder, whose low nickel-plated sides shone brilliantly. With interest they regarded the fifteen-foot object which tapered a bit towards its base. The nose was pointed like a bullet. Eight cylindrical protuberances were affixed to the base while the four sides were equipped with fins such as are seen on aerial bombs to guide them in a direct, unswerving line through the atmosphere. At the base of the strange craft there projected a lever, while in one side was a door which, apparently opened outward.
One of the machine men reached forward to open it but was halted by the admonition of the commander.

"Do not open it up yet!" he warned. "We are not aware of what it contains!"

Guided by the hand of one of the machine men, a series of lights shone down upon the cylinder. It became enveloped in a haze of light which rendered the metal sides of the mysterious space craft dim and indistinct while the interior of the cylinder was as clearly revealed as if there had been no covering. The machine men, expecting to see at least several, perhaps many, strange creatures moving about within the metal cylinder, stared aghast at the sight they beheld. There was but one creature, and he was lying perfectly still, either in a state of suspended animation or else of death. He was about twice the height of the mechanical men of Zor. For a long time they gazed at him in a silence of thought, and then their leader instructed them.

"Take him out of the container."

The penetration rays were turned off, and two of the machine men stepped eagerly forward and opened the door. One of them peered within at the recumbent body of the weird-looking individual with the four appendages. The creature lay up against a luxuriously upholstered interior, a strap affixed to his chin while four more straps held both the upper and lower appendages securely to the insides of the cylinder. The machine man released these, and with the help of his comrade removed the body of the creature from the cosmic coffin in which they had found it.

"He is dead!" pronounced one of the machine men after a long and careful examination of the corpse. "He has been like this for a long time."

"There are strange thought impressions left upon his mind," remarked another.

One of the machine men, whose metal body was of a different shade than that of his companions, stepped forward, his cubic body bent over that of the strange, cold creature who was garbed in fantastic accoutrements. He examined the dead organism a moment, and then he turned to his companions.

"Would you like to hear his story?" he asked.

"Yes!" came the concerted reply.

"You shall, then," was the ultimatum. "Bring him into my laboratory. I shall remove his brain and stimulate the cells into activity once more. We shall give him life again, transplanting his brain into the head of one of our machines."

With these words he directed two of the Zoromes to carry the corpse into the laboratory.

As the space ship cruised about in the vicinity of this third planet which 25X-987 had decided to visit on finding the metal cylinder with its queer inhabitant, 8B-52, the experimenter, worked unceasingly in his laboratory to revive the long-dead brain cells to action once more. Finally, after consummating his desires and having his efforts crowned with success, he placed the brain within the head of a machine. The brain was brought to consciousness. The creature's body was discarded after the all-important brain had been removed.

CHAPTER III
Recalled to Life

As Professor Jameson came to, he became aware of a strange feeling. He was sick. The doctors had not expected him to live; they had frankly told him so--but he had cared little in view of the long, happy years stretched out behind him. Perhaps he was not to die yet. He wondered how long he had slept. How strange he felt--as if he had no body. Why couldn't he open his eyes? He tried very hard. A mist swam before him. His eyes had been open all the time but he had not seen before. That was queer, he ruminated. All was silent about his bedside. Had all the doctors and nurses left him to sleep--or to die?

Devil take that mist which now swam before him, obscuring everything in line of vision. He would call his nephew. Vainly he attempted to shout the word "Douglas," but to no avail. Where was his mouth? It seemed as if he had none. Was it all delirium? The strange silence--perhaps he had lost his sense of hearing along with his ability to speak--and he could see nothing distinctly. The mist had transferred itself into a confused jumble of indistinct objects, some of which moved about before him.

He was now conscious of some impulse in his mind which kept questioning him as to how he felt. He was conscious of other strange ideas which seemed to be impressed upon his brain, but this one thought concerning his indisposition clamored insistently over the lesser ideas. It even seemed just as if someone was addressing him, and impulsively he attempted to utter a sound and tell them how queer he felt. It seemed as if speech had been taken from him. He could not talk, no matter how hard he tried. It was no use. Strange to say, however, the impulse within his mind appeared to be satisfied with the effort, and it now put another question to him. Where was he from? What a strange question--when he was at home. He told them as much. Had he always lived there? Why, yes, of course.

The aged professor was now becoming more astute as to his condition. At first it was only a mild, passive wonderment at his helplessness and the strange thoughts which raced through his mind. Now he attempted to arouse himself from the lethargy.

Quite suddenly his sight cleared, and what a surprise! He could see all the way around him without moving his
head! And he could look at the ceiling of his room! His room? Was it his room? No-- It just couldn't be. Where was he? What were those queer machines before him? They moved on four legs. Six tentacles curled outward from their cubical bodies. One of the machines stood close before him. A tentacle shot out from the object and rubbed his head. How strange it felt upon his brow. Instinctively he obeyed the impulse to shove the contraption of metal from him with his hands.

His arms did not rise, instead six tentacles projected upward to force back the machine. Professor Jameson gasped mentally in surprise as he gazed at the result of his urge to push the strange, unearthly looking machine-caricature from him. With trepidation he looked down at his own body to see where the tentacles had come from, and his surprise turned to sheer fright and amazement. His body was like the moving machine which stood before him! Where was he? What ever had happened to him so suddenly? Only a few moments ago he had been in his bed, with the doctors and his nephew bending over him, expecting him to die. The last words he had remembered hearing was the cryptic announcement of one of the doctors.

"He is going now."

But he hadn't died after all, apparently. A horrible thought struck him! Was this the life after death? Or was it an illusion of the mind? He became aware that the machine in front of him was attempting to communicate something to him. How could it, thought the professor, when he had no mouth. The desire to communicate an idea to him became more insistent. The suggestion of the machine man's question was in his mind. Telepathy, thought he.

The creature was asking about the place whence he had come. He didn't know; his mind was in such a turmoil of thoughts and conflicting ideas. He allowed himself to be led to a window where the machine with waving tentacle pointed towards an object outside. It was a queer sensation to be walking on the four metal legs. He looked from the window and he saw that which caused him to nearly drop over, so astounded was he.

The professor found himself gazing out from the boundless depths of space across the cosmic void to where a huge planet lay quiet. Now he was sure it was an illusion which made his mind and sight behave so queerly. He was troubled by a very strange dream. Carefully he examined the topography of the gigantic globe which rested off in the distance. At the same time he could see back of him the concourse of mechanical creatures crowding up behind him, and he was aware of a telepathic conversation which was being carried on behind him--or just before him. Which was it now? Eyes extended all the way around his head, while there existed no difference on any of the four sides of his cubed body. His mechanical legs were capable of moving in any of four given directions with perfect ease, he discovered.

The planet was not the earth--of that he was sure. None of the familiar continents lay before his eyes. And then he saw the great dull red ball of the dying sun. That was not the sun of his earth. It had been a great deal more brilliant.

"Did you come from that planet?" came the thought impulse from the mechanism by his side.

"No," he returned.

He then allowed the machine men--for he assumed that they were machine men, and he reasoned that, somehow or other they had by some marvelous transformation made him over just as they were--to lead him through the craft of which he now took notice for the first time. It was an interplanetary flyer, or space ship, he firmly believed.

25X-987 now took him to the compartment which they had removed him to from the strange container they had found wandering in the vicinity of the nearby world. There they showed him the long cylinder.

"It's my rocket satellite!" exclaimed Professor Jameson to himself, though in reality every one of the machine men received his thoughts plainly. "What is it doing here?"

"We found your dead body within it," answered 25X-987. "Your brain was removed to the machine after having been stimulated into activity once more. Your carcass was thrown away."

Professor Jameson just stood dumfounded by the words of the machine man.

"So I did die!" exclaimed the professor. "And my body was placed within the rocket to remain in everlasting preservation until the end of all earthly time! Success! I have now attained unrivaled success!"

He then turned to the machine man.

"How long have I been that way?" he asked excitedly.

"How should we know?" replied the Zorome. "We picked up your rocket only a short time ago, which, according to your computation, would be less than a day. This is our first visit to your planetary system and we chanced upon your rocket. So it is a satellite? We didn't watch it long enough to discover whether or not it was a satellite. At first we thought it to be another traveling space craft, but when it refused to answer our signals we investigated."

"And so that was the earth at which I looked," mused the professor. "No wonder I didn't recognize it. The topography has changed so much. How different the sun appears--it must have been over a million years ago when I
"Many millions," corrected 25X-987. "Suns of such size as this one do not cool in so short a time as you suggest."

Professor Jameson, in spite of all his amazing computations before his death, was staggered by the reality.

"Who are you?" he suddenly asked.

"We are the Zoromes from Zor, a planet of a sun far across the Universe."

25X-987 then went on to tell Professor Jameson something about how the Zoromes had attained their high stage of development and had instantly put a stop to all birth, evolution and death of their people, by becoming machine men.

CHAPTER IV
The Dying World

"And now tell us of yourself," said 25X-987, "and about your world."

Professor Jameson, noted in college as a lecturer of no mean ability and perfectly capable of relating intelligently to them the story of the earth's history, evolution and march of events following the birth of civilization up until the time when he died, began his story. The mental speech hampered him for a time, but he soon became accustomed to it so as to use it easily, and he found it preferable to vocal speech after a while. The Zoromes listened interestedly to the long account until Professor Jameson had finished.

"My nephew," concluded the professor, "evidently obeyed my instructions and placed my body in the rocket I had built, shooting it out into space where I became the satellite of the earth for these many millions of years."

"Do you really want to know how long you were dead before we found you?" asked 25X-987. "It would be interesting to find out."

"Yes, I should like very much to know," replied the professor.

"Our greatest mathematician, 459C-79, will tell it to you." The mathematician stepped forward. Upon one side of his cube were many buttons arranged in long columns and squares.

"What is your unit of measuring?" he asked.

"A mile."

"How many times more is a mile than is the length of your rocket satellite?"

"My rocket is fifteen feet long. A mile is five thousand two hundred and eighty feet."

The mathematician depressed a few buttons.

"How far, or how many miles from the sun was your planet at that time?"

"Ninety-three million miles," was the reply.

"And your world's satellite--which you call moon from your planet--earth?"

"Two hundred and forty thousand miles."

"And your rocket?"

"I figured it to go about sixty-five thousand miles from the earth."

"It was only twenty thousand miles from the earth when we picked it up," said the mathematician, depressing a few more buttons. "The moon and sun are also much nearer your planet now."

* * * * *

Professor Jameson gave way to a mental ejaculation of amazement.

"Do you know how long you have cruised around the planet in your own satellite?" said the mathematician. "Since you began that journey, the planet which you call the earth has revolved around the sun over forty million times."

"Forty--million--years!" exclaimed Professor Jameson haltingly. " Humanity must then have all perished from the earth long ago! I'm the last man on earth!"

"It is a dead world now," interjected 25X-987.

"Of course," elucidated the mathematician, "those last few million years are much shorter than the ones in which you lived. The earth's orbit is of less diameter and its speed of revolution is greatly increased, due to its proximity to the cooling sun. I should say that your year was some four times as long as the time in which it now takes your old planet to circumnavigate the sun."

"How many days were there in your year?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five."

"The planet has now ceased rotating entirely."

"Seems queer that your rocket satellite should avoid the meteors so long," observed 459C-79, the mathematician.

"Automatic radium repulsion rays," explained the professor.

"The very rays which kept us from approaching your rocket," stated 25X-987, "until we neutralized them."
"You died and were shot out into space long before any life occurred on Zor," soliloquized one of the machine men. "Our people had not yet even been born when yours had probably disappeared entirely from the face of the earth."

"Hearken to 72N-4783," said 25X-987, "he is our philosopher, and he just loves to dwell on the past life of Zor when we were flesh and blood creatures with the threat of death hanging always over our heads. At that time, like the life you knew, we were born, we lived and died, all within a very short time, comparatively."

"Of course, time has come to mean nothing to us, especially when we are out in space," observed 72N-4783. "We never keep track of it on our expeditions, though back in Zor such accounts are accurately kept. By the way, do you know how long we stood here while you recounted to us the history of your planet? Our machine bodies never get tired, you know."

* * * * *

"Well," ruminated Professor Jameson, giving a generous allowance of time. "I should say about a half a day, although it seemed scarcely as long as that."

"We listened to you for four days," replied 72N-4783.

Professor Jameson was really aghast.

"Really, I hadn't meant to be such a bore," he apologized.

"That is nothing," replied the other. "Your story was interesting, and if it had been twice as long, it would not have mattered, nor would it have seemed any longer. Time is merely relative, and in space actual time does not exist at all, any more than your forty million years' cessation of life seemed more than a few moments to you. We saw that it was so when your first thought impressions reached us following your revival."

"Let us continue on to your planet earth," then said 25X-987. "Perhaps we shall find more startling disclosures there."

As the space ship of the Zoromes approached the sphere from which Professor Jameson had been hurled in his rocket forty million years before, the professor was wondering how the earth would appear, and what radical changes he would find. Already he knew that the geographical conditions of the various continents were changed. He had seen as much from the space ship.

A short time later the earth was reached. The space travelers from Zor, as well as Professor Jameson, emerged from the cosmic flyer to walk upon the surface of the planet. The earth had ceased rotating, leaving one-half its surface always toward the sun. This side of the earth was heated to a considerable degree, while its antipodes, turned always away from the solar luminary, was a cold, frigid, desolate waste. The space travelers from Zor did not dare to advance very far into either hemisphere, but landed on the narrow, thousand-mile strip of territory separating the earth's frozen half from its sun-baked antipodes.

As Professor Jameson emerged from the space ship with 25X-987, he stared in awe at the great transformation four hundred thousand centuries had wrought. The earth's surface, its sky and the sun were all so changed and unearthly appearing. Off to the east the blood red ball of the slowly cooling sun rested upon the horizon, lighting up the eternal day. The earth's rotation had ceased entirely, and it hung motionless in the sky as it revolved around its solar parent, its orbit slowly but surely cutting in toward the great body of the sun. The two inner planets, Mercury and Venus, were now very close to the blood red orb whose scintillating, dazzling brilliance had been lost in its cooling process. Soon, the two nearer planets would succumb to the great pull of the solar luminary and return to the flaming folds, from which they had been hurled out as gaseous bodies in the dim, age-old past, when their careers had just begun.

The atmosphere was nearly gone, so rarefied had it become, and through it Professor Jameson could view with amazing clarity without discomfort to his eyes the bloated body of the dying sun. It appeared many times the size he had seen it at the time of his death, on account of its relative nearness. The earth had advanced a great deal closer to the great star around which it swung.

The sky towards the west was pitch black except for the iridescent twinkle of the fiery stars which studded that section of the heavens. As he watched, a faint glow suffused the western sky, gradually growing brighter, the full moon majestically lifted itself above the horizon, casting its pale, ethereal radiance upon the dying world beneath. It was increased to many times the size Professor Jameson had ever seen it during his natural lifetime. The earth's greater attraction was drawing upon the moon just as the sun was pulling the earth ever nearer itself.

This cheerless landscape confronting the professor represented the state of existence to which the earth had come. It was a magnificent spread of loneliness which bore no witness to the fact that it had seen the teeming of life in better ages long ago. The weird, yet beautiful scene, spread in a melancholy panorama before his eyes, drove his thoughts into gloomy abstraction with its dismal, depressing influence. Its funereal, oppressive aspect smote him suddenly with the chill of a terrible loneliness.

25X-987 aroused Professor Jameson from his lethargic reverie. "Let us walk around and see what we can find. I
can understand how you feel in regard to the past. It is quite a shock--but it must happen to all worlds sooner or later--even to Zor. When that time comes, the Zoromes will find a new planet on which to live. If you travel with us, you will become accustomed to the sight of seeing dead, lifeless worlds as well as new and beautiful ones pulsating with life and energy. Of course, this world being your own, holds a peculiar sentimental value to you, but it is really one planet among billions."

Professor Jameson was silent.

"I wonder whether or not there are any ruins here to be found?" queried 25X-987.

"I don't believe so," replied the professor. "I remember hearing an eminent scientist of my day state that, given fifty thousand years, every structure and other creation of man would be obliterated entirely from off the earth's surface."

"And he was right," endorsed the machine man of Zor. "Time is a great effacer."

For a long time the machine men wandered over the dreary surface of the earth, and then 25X-987 suggested a change of territory to explore. In the space ship, they moved around the earth to the other side, still keeping to the belt of shadowland which completely encircled the globe like some gigantic ring. Where they now landed arose a series of cones with hollow peaks.

"Volcanoes!" exclaimed the professor.

"Extinct ones," added the machine man.

Leaving the space ship, the fifty or more machine men, including also Professor Jameson, were soon exploring the curiously shaped peaks. The professor, in his wanderings had strayed away from the rest, and now advanced into one of the cup-like depressions of the peak, out of sight of his companions, the Zoromes.

CHAPTER V

Eternity or Death

He was well in the center of the cavity when the soft ground beneath him gave way suddenly and he catapulted below into the darkness. Through the Stygian gloom he fell in what seemed to be an endless drop. He finally crashed upon something hard. The thin crust of the volcano's mouth had broken through, precipitating him into the deep, hollow interior.

It must have been a long ways to fall--or so it had seemed. Why was he not knocked senseless or killed? Then he felt himself over with three tentacles. His metal legs were four broken, twisted masses of metal, while the lower half of his cubic body was jammed out of shape and split. He could not move, and half of his six tentacles were paralyzed.

How would he ever get out of there? he wondered. The machine men of Zor might never find him. What would happen to him, then? He would remain in this deathless, monotonous state forever in the black hole of the volcano's interior unable to move. What a horrible thought! He could not starve to death; eating was unknown among the Zoromes, the machines requiring no food. He could not even commit suicide. The only way for him to die would be to smash the strong metal head, and in his present immovable condition, this was impossible.

It suddenly occurred to him to radiate thoughts for help. Would the Zoromes receive his messages? He wondered how far the telepathic messages would carry. He concentrated the powers of his mind upon the call for help, and repeatedly stated his position and plight. He then left his mind clear to receive the thought answers of the Zoromes. He received none. Again he tried. Still he received no welcoming answer. Professor Jameson became dejected.

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It was hopeless. The telepathic messages had not reached the machine men of Zor. They were too far away, just as one person may be out of earshot of another's voice. He was doomed to a terrible fate of existence! It were better that his rocket had never been found. He wished that the Zoromes had destroyed him instead of bringing him back to life--back to this!

His thoughts were suddenly broken in upon.

"We're coming!"

"Don't give up hope!"

If the professor's machine body had been equipped with a heart, it would have sung for joy at these welcome thought impressions. A short time later there appeared in the ragged break of the volcano's mouth, where he had fallen through, the metal head of one of the machine men.

"We shall have you out of there soon," he said.

* * * * *

The professor never knew how they managed it for he lost consciousness under some strange ray of light they projected down upon him in his prison. When he came to consciousness once more, it was to find himself inside the space ship.
"If you had fallen and had smashed your head, it would have been all over with you," were the first thought impulses which greeted him. "As it is, however, we can fix you up first rate."

"Why didn't you answer the first time I called to you?" asked the professor. "Didn't you hear me?"

"We heard you, and we answered, but you didn't hear us. You see, your brain is different than ours, and though you can send thought waves as far as we can you cannot receive them from such a great distance."

"I'm wrecked," said the professor, gazing at his twisted limbs, paralyzed tentacles and jammed body.

"We shall repair you," came the reply. "It is your good fortune that your head was not crushed."

"What are you going to do with me?" queried the professor. "Will you remove my brains to another machine?"

"No, it isn't necessary. We shall merely remove your head and place it upon another machine body."

The Zoromes immediately set to work upon the task, and soon had Professor Jameson's metal head removed from the machine which he had wrecked in his fall down the crater. All during the painless operation, the professor kept up a series of thought exchanges in conversation with the Zoromes, and it seemed but a short time before his head surmounted a new machine and he was ready for further exploration. In the course of his operation, the space ship had moved to a new position, and now as they emerged 25X-987 kept company with Professor Jameson.

"I must keep an eye on you," he said. "You will be getting into more trouble before you get accustomed to the metal bodies."

But Professor Jameson was doing a great deal of thinking. Doubtlessly, these strange machine men who had picked up his rocket in the depths of space and had brought him back to life, were expecting him to travel with them and become adopted into the ranks of the Zoromes. Did he want to go with them? He couldn't decide. He had forgotten that the machine men could read his innermost thoughts.

"You wish to remain here alone upon the earth?" asked 25X-987. "It is your privilege if you really want it so."

"I don't know," replied Professor Jameson truthfully.

He gazed at the dust around his feet. It had probably been the composition of men, and had changed from time to time into various other atomic structures--of other queer forms of life which had succeeded mankind. It was the law of the atom which never died. And now he had within his power perpetual existence. He could be immortal if he wished! It would be an immortality of never-ending adventures in the vast, endless Universe among the galaxy of stars and planets.

A great loneliness seized him. Would he be happy among these machine men of another far-off world--among these Zoromes? They were kindly and solicitous of his welfare. What better fate could he expect? Still, a longing for his own kind arose in him--the call of humanity. It was irresistible. What could he do? Was it not in vain? Humanity had long since disappeared from the earth--millions of years ago. He wondered what lay beyond the pale of death--the real death, where the body decomposed and wasted away to return to the dust of the earth and assume new atomic structures.

He had begun to wonder whether or not he had been dead all these forty millions of years--suppose he had been merely in a state of suspended animation. He had remembered a scientist of his day, who had claimed that the body does not die at the point of official death. According to the claims of this man, the cells of the body did not die at the moment at which respiration, heart beats and the blood circulation ceased, but it existed in the semblance of life for several days afterward, especially in the cells of the bones, which died last of all.

Perhaps when he had been sent out into space in his rocket right after his death, the action of the cosmic void was to halt his slow death of the cells in his body, and hold him in suspended animation during the ensuing millions of years. Suppose he should really die--destroying his own brain? What lay beyond real death? Would it be a better plane of existence than the Zoromes could offer him? Would he rediscover humanity, or had they long since arisen to higher planes of existence or reincarnation? Did time exist beyond the mysterious portals of death? If not, then it was possible for him to join the souls of the human race. Had he really been dead all this time? If so, he knew what to expect in case he really destroyed his own brain. Oblivion!

Again the intense feeling of loneliness surged over him and held him within its melancholy grasp. Desperately, he decided to find the nearest cliff and jump from it--head-first! Humanity called; no man lived to companion him. His four metal limbs carried him swiftly to the summit of a nearby precipice. Why not gamble on the hereafter? 25X-987, understanding his trend of thought, did not attempt to restrain him. Instead, the machine man of Zor waited patiently.

As Professor Jameson stood there meditating upon the jump which would hurl him now into a new plane of existence--or into oblivion, the thought transference of 25X-987 reached him. It was laden with the wisdom born of many planets and thousands of centuries' experience.

"Why jump?" asked the machine man. "The dying world holds your imagination within a morbid clutch. It is all a matter of mental condition. Free your mind of this fascinating influence and come with us to visit other worlds,
many of them are both beautiful and new. You will then feel a great difference.

"Will you come?"

The professor considered for a moment as he resisted the impulse to dive off the declivity to the enticing rocks far below. An inspiration seized him. Backing away from the edge of the cliff, he joined 25X-987 once more.

"I shall come," he stated.

He would become an immortal after all and join the Zoromes in their never-ending adventures from world to world. They hastened to the space ship to escape the depressing, dreary influence of the dying world, which had nearly driven Professor Jameson to take the fatal leap to oblivion.

THE END

Contents

A MATTER OF IMPORTANCE
by Murray Leinster

The importance of a matter is almost entirely a matter of your attitude. And whether you call something "a riot" or "a war" ... well, there is a difference, but what is it?

Nobody ever saw the message-torp. It wasn't to be expected. It came in on a course that extended backward to somewhere near the Rift--where there used to be Huks--and for a very, very long way it had traveled as only message-torps do travel. It hopped half a light-year in overdrive, and came back to normality long enough for its photocells to inspect the star-filled universe all about. Then it hopped another half light-year, and so on. For a long, long time it traveled in this jerky fashion.

Eventually, moving as it did in the straightest of straight lines, its photocells reported that it neared a star which had achieved first-magnitude brightness. It paused a little longer than usual while its action-circuits shifted. Then it swung to aim for the bright star, which was the sol-type sun Varenga. The torp sped toward it on a new schedule. Its overdrive hops dropped to light-month length. Its pauses in normality were longer. They lasted almost the fiftieth of a second.

When Varenga had reached a suitably greater brightness in the message-torp's estimation, it paused long enough to blast out its recorded message. It had been designed for this purpose and no other. Its overdrive hops shortened to one light-hour of distance covered. Regularly, its transmitter flung out a repetition of what it had been sent so far to say. In time it arrived within the limits of the Varenga system. Its hops diminished to light-minutes of distance only. It ceased to correct its course. It hurtled through the orbits of all the planets, uttering silently screamed duplicates of the broadcasts now left behind, to arrive later.

It did not fall into the sun, of course. The odds were infinitely against such a happening. It pounded past the sun, shrieking its news, and hurtled on out to the illimitable emptiness beyond. It was still squealing when it went out of human knowledge forever.

* * * * *

The state of things was routine. Sergeant Madden had the traffic desk that morning. He would reach retirement age in two more years, and it was a nagging reminder that he grew old. He didn't like it. There was another matter. His son Timmy had a girl, and she was on the way to Varenga IV on the Cerberus, and when she arrived Timmy would become a married man. Sergeant Madden contemplated this prospect. By the time his retirement came up, in the ordinary course of events he could very well be a grandfather. He was unable to imagine it. He rumbled to himself.

The telefax hummed and ejected a sheet of paper on top of other sheets in the desk's "In" cubicle. Sergeant Madden glanced absently at it. It was an operations-report sheet, to be referred to if necessary, but otherwise simply to be filed at the end of the day.

A voice crackled overhead.

"Attention Traffic," said the voice. "The following report has been received and verified as off-planet. Message follows." That voice ceased and was replaced by another, which wavered and wabbled from the electron-spurts normal to solar systems and which make for auroras on planets. "Mayday mayday mayday," said the second voice. "Call for help. Call for help. Ship Cerberus major breakdown overdrive heading Procyron III for refuge. Help urgently needed." There was a pause. "Mayday mayday mayday. Call for help--"

Sergeant Madden's face went blank. Timmy's girl was on the Cerberus. Then he growled and riffled swiftly
through the operations-report sheets that had come in since his tour of duty began. He found the one he looked for.
Yes. Patrolman Timothy Madden was now in overdrive in squad ship 740, delivering the monthly precinct report to
Headquarters. He would be back in eight days. Maybe a trifle less, with his girl due to arrive on the Cerberus in nine
and him to be married in ten. But--

Sergeant Madden swore. As a prospective bridegroom, Timmy's place was on this call for help to the Cerberus.
But he wasn't available. It was in his line, because it was specifically a traffic job. The cops handled traffic,
naturally, as they handled sanitary-code enforcement and delinks and mercantile offenses and murderers and
swindlers and missing persons. Everything was dumped on the cops. They'd even handled the Huks in time gone by-
which in still earlier times would have been called a space war and put down in all the history books. It was routine
for the cops to handle the disabled or partly disabled Cerberus.

Sergeant Madden pushed a button marked "Traffic Emergency" and held it down until it lighted.
"You got that Cerberus report?" he demanded of the air about him.
"Just," said a voice overhead.
"What've you got on hand?" demanded Sergeant Madden.
"The Aldeb's here," said the voice. "There's a minor overhaul going on, but we can get her going in six hours.
She's slow, but you know her."
"Hm-m-m. Yeah," said Sergeant Madden. He added vexedly: "My son Timmy's girl is on board the Cerberus.
He'll be wild he wasn't here. I'm going to take the ready squad ship and go on out. Passengers always fret when
there's trouble and no cop around. Too bad Timmy's off on assignment."
"Yeah," said the Traffic Emergency voice. "Too bad. But we'll get the Aldeb off in six hours."
Sergeant Madden pushed another button. It lighted.
"Madden," he rumbled. "Desk. The Cerberus' had a breakdown. She's limpin' over to Procyron III for refuge to
wait for help. The Aldeb'll do the job on her, but I'm going to ride the squad ship out and make up the report. Who's
next on call-duty?"
"Pull him loose," Sergeant Madden ordered, "and send somebody to take the desk. Tell Willis I'll be on the
tarmac in five minutes."
"Check," said the crisp voice.
Sergeant Madden lifted his thumb. All this was standard operational procedure. A man had the desk. An
emergency call came in. That man took it and somebody else took the desk. Evidently fair. No favoritism; no
throwing weight around; no glory-grabbing. Not that there was much glory in being a cop. But as long as a man was
a cop, he was good. Sergeant Madden reflected with satisfaction that even if he was getting on to retirement age, he
was still a cop.

He made two more calls. One was to Records for the customary full information on the Cerberus and on the
Procyron system. The other was to the flat where Timmy lived with him. It was going to be lonely when Timmy got
married and had a home of his own. Sergeant Madden dialed for message-recording and gruffly left word for
Timmy. He, Timmy's father, was going on ahead to make the report on the Cerberus. Timmy wasn't to worry. The
ship might be a few days late, but Timmy'd better make the most of them. He'd be married a long time!

Sergeant Madden got up, grunting, from his chair. Somebody came in to take over the desk. Sergeant Madden
oded and waved his hand. He went out and took the slide-stair down to the tarmac where squad ship 390 waited in
standard police readiness. Patrolman Willis arrived at the stubby little craft seconds after the sergeant.
"Procyron III," said Sergeant Madden, rumbling. "I figure three days. You told your wife?"
"I called," said Patrolman Willis resignedly.
They climbed into the squad ship. Police ships, naturally, had their special drive, which could lift them off
without rocket aid and gave them plenty of speed, but filled up the hull with so much machinery that it was only
practical for such ships. Commercial craft were satisfied with low-power drives, which meant that spaceport
facilities lifted them to space and pulled them down again. They carried rockets for emergency landing, but the main
thing was that they had a profitable pay load. Squad ships didn't carry anything but two men and their equipment.

Sergeant Madden dogged the door shut. The ship fell up toward the sky. The heavens became that blackness-
studded-with-jewels which is space. A great yellow sun flared astern. A half-bright, half-dark globe lay below-the
planet Varenga IV, on which the precinct police station for this part of the galaxy had its location.

Patrolman Willis, frowning with care, established the squad ship's direction, while Sergeant Madden observed
without seeming to do so. Presently Patrolman Willis pushed a button. The squad ship went into overdrive.

It was perfectly commonplace in all its aspects.

* * * * *
The galaxy went about its business. Stars shone, and planets moved around them, and double stars circled each other like waltzing couples. There were also comets and meteors and calcium-clouds and high-energy free nuclei, all of which acted as was appropriate for them. On some millions of planets winds blew and various organisms practiced photosynthesis. Waves ran across seas. Clouds formed and poured down rain. On the relatively small number of worlds so far inhabited by humans, people went about their business with no thought for such things or anything not immediately affecting their lives. And the cops went about their business.

Sergeant Madden dozed most of the first day of overdrive travel. He had nothing urgent to do, as yet. This was only a routine trip. The Cerberus had had a breakdown in her overdrive. Commercial ships' drives being what they were, it meant that on her emergency drive she could only limp along at maybe eight or ten lights. Which meant years to port, with neither food nor air for the journey. But it was not even conceivable to rendezvous with a rescue ship in the emptiness between stars. So the Cerberus had sent a message-torp and was crawling to a refuge-planet, more or less surveyed a hundred years before. There she would land by emergency rockets, because her drive couldn't take the strain. Once aground, the Cerberus should wait for help. There was nothing else to be done. But everything was nicely in hand. The squad ship headed briskly for the planet Procyron III, and Sergeant Madden would take the data for a proper, official, emergency-call traffic report on the incident, and in time the Aldeb would turn up and make emergency repairs and see the Cerberus out to space again and headed for port once more.

This was absolutely all that there was to anticipate. Traffic handled such events as a matter of course. So Sergeant Madden dozed during most of the first day of overdrive. He reflected somnolently when awake that it was fitting for Timmy's father to be on the job when Timmy's girl was in difficulty, since Timmy was off somewhere else.

On the second day he conversed more or less with Patrolman Willis. Willis was a young cop, almost as young as Timmy. He took himself very seriously. When Sergeant Madden reached for the briefing-data, he found it disturbed. Willis had read up on the kind of ship the Cerberus was, and on the characteristics of Procyron III as recorded a century before. The Cerberus was a semi-freighter, Candles type. Procyron III was a water-planet with less than ten per cent of land. Which was unfortunate, because its average temperature and orbit made it highly suitable for human occupation. Had the ten per cent of solid ground been in one piece, it would doubtless have been colonized. But the ground was an archipelago.

"Hm-m-m," said Sergeant Madden, after reading. "The survey recommends this northern island for emergency landing. Eh?"

Willis nodded. "Huks used to use it. Not the island. The planet."

Sergeant Madden yawned. It seemed pathetic to him that young cops like Willis and even Timmy referred so often to Huks. There weren't any, any more. Being a cop meant carrying out purely routine tasks, nowadays. They were important tasks, of course. Without the cops, there couldn't be any civilization. But Willis and Timmy didn't think of it that way. Not yet. To them being a cop was still a matter of glamour rather than routine. They probably even regretted the absence of Huks. But when a man reached Sergeant Madden's age, glamour didn't matter. He had to remember that his job was worth doing, in itself.

"Yeah," said Sergeant Madden. "There was quite a time with those Huks."

"Did you ... did you ever see a Huk, sir?" asked Willis.

"Before my time," said Sergeant Madden. "But I've talked to men who worked on the case."

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It did not occur to him that the Huks would hardly have been called a "case" by anybody but a cop. When human colonies spread through this sector, they encountered an alien civilization. By old-time standards, it was quite a culture. The Huks had a good technology, they had spaceships, and they were just beginning to expand, themselves, from their own home planet or planets. If they'd had a few more centuries of development, they might have been a menace to humanity. But the humans got started first.

There being no longer any armies or navies when the Huks were discovered, the matter of intelligent nonhumans was a matter for the cops. So the police matter-of-factly tried to incorporate the Huk culture into the human. They explained the rules by which human civilization worked. They painstakingly tried to arrange a sub-precinct station on the largest Huk home planet, with Huk cops in charge. They made it clear that they had nothing to do with politics and were simply concerned with protecting civilized people from those in their midst who didn't want to be civilized.

The Huks wouldn't have it. They bristled, proudly. They were defiant. They considered themselves not only as good as humans--the cops didn't care what they thought--but they insisted on acting as if they were better. They reacted, in fact, as humans would have done if just at the beginning of their conquest of the stars, they'd run into an expanding, farther-advanced race which tried to tell them what they had to do. The Huks fought.

"They fought pretty good," said Sergeant Madden tolerantly. "Not killer-fashion--like delinks. The Force had to
give 'em the choice of joining up or getting out. Took years to get 'em out. Had to use all the off-duty men from six precincts to handle the last riot."

The conflict he called a riot would have been termed a space battle by a navy or an army. But the cops operated within a strictly police frame of reference, which was the reverse of military. They weren't trying to subjugate the Huks, but to make them behave. In consequence, their tactics were unfathomable to the Huks—who thought in military terms. Squadrons of police ships which would have seemed ridiculous to a fighting-force commander threw the Huks off-balance, kept them off-balance, did a scrupulous minimum of damage to them, and thereby kept out of every trap the Huks set for them. In the end the cops supervised and assisted at the embittered, rebellious emigration of a race. The Huks took off for the far side of the galaxy. They'd neither been conquered nor exterminated. But Sergeant Madden thought of the decisive fracas as a riot rather than a battle.

"Yeah," he repeated. "They acted a lot like delinks."

Patrolman Willis spoke with some heat about delinks, who are the bane of all police forces everywhere. They practice adolescent behavior even after they grow up--but they never grow up. It is delinks who put stink-bombs in public places and write threatening letters and give warnings of bombs about to go off--and sometimes set them--and stuff dirt into cold rocket-nozzles and sometimes kill people and go incontinently hysterical because they didn't mean to. Delinks do most of the damaging things that have no sense to them. There is no cop who has not wanted to kill some grinning, half-scared, half-defiant delink who hasn't yet realized that he's destroyed half a million credits' worth of property or crippled somebody for life--for no reason at all.

Sergeant Madden listened to the denunciation of all the delink tribe. Then he yawned again.

"I know!" he said. "I don't like 'em either. But we got 'em. We always will have 'em. Like old age."

Then he made computations with a stubby pencil and asked reflectively:

"When're you coming out of overdrive?"

Patrolman Willis told him. Sergeant Madden nodded.

"I'll take another nap," he observed. "We'll be there a good twenty-two hours before the Aldeb."

The little squad ship went on at an improbable multiple of the speed of light. After all, this was a perfectly normal performance. Just an ordinary bit of business for the cops.

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Sergeant Madden belched when the squad ship came out of overdrive. He watched with seeming indifference while Patrolman Willis took a spectro on the star ahead and to the left, and painstakingly compared the reading with the ancient survey-data on the Procyron system. It had to match, of course, unless there'd been extraordinarily bad astrogation.

Willis put the spectroscope away, estimated for himself, and then checked with the dial that indicated the brightness of the still point-sized star. He said:

"Four light-weeks, I make it."

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Sergeant Madden nodded. A superior officer should never do anything useful, so long as a subordinate isn't making a serious mistake. That is the way subordinates are trained to become superiors, in time. Patrolman Willis set a time-switch and pushed the overdrive button. The squad ship hopped, and abruptly the local sun had a perceptible disk. Willis made the usual tests for direction of rotation, to get the ecliptic plane. He began to search for planets. As he found them, he checked with the reference data. All this was tedious. Sergeant Madden grunted:

"That'll be it," he said, and pointed. "Water world. It's the color of ocean. Try it."

Patrolman Willis threw on the telescope screen. The image of the distant planet leaped into view. It was Procyron III. The spiral cloud-arms of a considerable storm showed in the southern hemisphere, but in the north there was a group or specks which would be the planet's only solid ground--the archipelago reported by the century-old survey. The Cerberus should have been the first ship to land there in a hundred years, and the squad ship should be the second.

Patrolman Willis got the squad ship competently over to the planet, a diameter out. He juggled to position over the archipelago. Sergeant Madden turned on the space phone. Nothing. He frowned. A grounded ship awaiting help should transmit a beam signal to guide its rescuer. But nothing came up from the ground.

Patrolman Willis looked at him uncertainly. Sergeant Madden rumbled and swung the telescope below. The surface of the planet appeared--deep water, practically black beneath a surface reflection of daytime sky. The image shifted--a patch of barren rocks. The sergeant glanced at the survey picture, shifted the telescope, and found the northern-most island. He swelled the picture. He could see the white of monstrous surf breaking on the windward shore--waves that had gathered height going all around the planet. He traced the shoreline. There was a bay up at the top.

He centered the shoreline of the bay and put on maximum magnification. Then he pointed a stubby forefinger. A singular, perfectly straight streak of black appeared, beginning a little distance inland from the bay and running up
into what appeared to be higher ground. The streak ended not far from a serpentine arm of the sea which almost cut
the island in half.

"That'll be it," said Sergeant Madden, rumbling. "The Cerberus had to land on her rockets. She had some
ground speed. She burned a ten-mile streak on the ground, coming down." He growled. "Commercial skippers!
Should've matched velocity aloft! Take her down."

The squad ship drove for ground.
Patrolman Willis steadied the ship no more than a few thousand feet high, above the streak of scorched ground
and ashes.

"It was heading inland, all right," rumbled Sergeant Madden. "Lucky! If it'd been heading the other way, it
could've gone out and landed in the sea. That would ha' been a mess! But where is it?"

The squad ship descended farther. It followed the lane of carbonized soil. That marking narrowed--the Cerberus
had plainly been descending. Then the streak came to an end. It pinched out to nothing. The Cerberus should have
been at its end.

It wasn't. There was no ship down on Procyron III.

* * * * *

The matter ceased to be routine. If the liner's drive conked out where Procyron III was the nearest refuge planet,
it should have landed here at least six days ago. Some ship had landed here recently.

"Set down," grunted Sergeant Madden.
Patrolman Willis obeyed. The squad ship came to rest in a minor valley, a few hundred yards from the end of
the rocket-blast trail. Sergeant Madden got out. Patrolman Willis followed him. This was a duly surveyed and
recommended refuge planet. There was no need to check the air or take precautions against inimical animal or
vegetable life. The planet was safe.

They clambered over small rocky obstacles until they came to the end of the scorched line. They surveyed the
state of things in silence.
A ship had landed here recently. Its blue-white rocket flames had melted gulleys in the soil, turned it to slag,
and then flung silky, gossamer threads of slag-wool over the rocks nearby.

At the end of the melted-away hollows, twin slag-lined holes went down deep into the ground. They were take-
off holes. Rockets had burned them deeply as they gathered force to lift the ship away again.

Sergeant Madden scrambled to the edge of the nearest blast-well. He put his hand on the now-solidified, glassy
slag. It wasn't warm, but it wasn't cold. The glass-lined hole a rocket leaves takes a long time to cool down.

"She landed here, all right," he grunted. "But she took off again before the torp arrived to tell us about it."

Willis protested:
"But, sergeant! She only had one set of rockets! She couldn't have taken off again! She didn't have the rockets
to do it with!"

"I know she couldn't," growled the sergeant. "But she did."

The Cerberus, once landed, should have waited here. It was not only a police regulation; it was common sense.
When a ship broke down in space, the exclusive hope for that ship's company lay in a refuge planet for ships in that
traffic lane. Even lifeboats could ordinarily reach some refuge planet, for picking up later. They couldn't possibly be
located otherwise. With three dimensions in which to be missed, and light-years of distance in which to miss them--
no ship or boat had ever been found as much as a light-week out in space. No ship with a crippled drive could
possibly be helped unless it got to a specified refuge world where it could be found. No ship which had reached a
refuge planet could conceivably want to leave it.

There was also the fact that no ship which had made such a landing would have extra rockets with which to
take off for departure.

The Cerberus had landed. Timmy's girl was on it. It had taken off again. It was either an impossible mass
suicide or something worse. It certainly wasn't routine.

Patrolman Willis asked hesitantly:
"D'you think, sergeant, it could be Huks sneaked back--?"

Sergeant Madden did not answer. He went back to the squad ship and armed himself. Patrolman Willis
followed suit. The sergeant boobied the squad ship so no unauthorized person could make use of it, and so it would
disable itself if anyone with expert knowledge tried. Therefore, nobody with expert knowledge would try.

The two cops began a painstaking quest for police-type evidence to tell them what had happened, and how and
why the Cerberus was missing, after a clumsy but safe landing on Procyron III and when all sanity demanded that it
stay there, and when it was starkly impossible for it to leave.

* * * * *

Sergeant Madden and Patrolman Willis were, self-evidently, the only human beings on a planet some nine
thousand miles in diameter. It was easy to compute that the nearest other humans would be at least some thousands of thousands of millions of miles away—so far away that distance had no meaning. This planet was something over nine-tenth rolling sea, but there were a few tens of thousands of square miles of solid ground in the one archipelago that broke the ocean’s surface. It was such loneliness as very few people ever experience. But they did not notice it. They were busy.

They went over the ground immediately about the landing place. Rocket flame had splashed it, both at the Cerberus’ landing and at the impossible take-off. There was nothing within a hundred yards not burned to a crisp. They searched outside that area. Sergeant Madden rumbled to his companion:

"Where’d the other ship land?"

Patrolman Willis blinked at him.

"There had to be another ship!" said Sergeant Madden irritably. "To bring the extra rockets. The other ship had to’ve brought ’em. And it had to have rockets of its own. There’s no spaceport here!"

Patrolman Willis blinked again. Then he saw. The Cerberus carried one set of emergency-landing rockets, for use in a descent on a refuge planet if the need arose. The need had arisen and the Cerberus had used them. Then, from somewhere, another set of rockets had been produced for it to use in leaving. Those other rockets must have come on another ship. But it was a trifle more complicated than that. The Cerberus had carried one set of rockets and used them. One. It had been supplied with another set from somewhere. Two. They must have been brought by a ship which also used a set of rockets to land by. That made three. Then the other ship must have had a fourth set for its own take-off, or it would be grounded forever on Procyron III.

Patrolman Willis frowned.

"We looked pretty carefully from aloft," he said uncomfortably. "If there’d been another burned-off landing place, we’d have seen it."

"I know," rumbled Sergeant Madden. "And we didn’t. But there must’ve been another ship aground when the Cerberus came in. Where was it? It prob’ly knew the Cerberus was landing to wait for help. How? If somebody was coming to help the Cerberus it would be bound to spot the other ship, and it didn’t want to be spotted. Why? Anyhow, it must’ve taken the Cerberus and sent it off, and then taken off itself, leaving nothing sensible for us to think. ‘Sounds like delinks.’ Then he growled. "Only it’s not. There’d have to be too many men. Delinks don’t work together more’n two or three. Too jealous of showin’ off. But where was that other ship, and what was it doin’ here?"

Patrolman Willis hesitated, and then said:

"There used to be pirates, sergeant."

"Uh-huh," said the sergeant. "You had it right the first time, most likely. Not delinks. Not pirates. You said Huks." He looked around, estimatingly. "The rockets had to be brought here from somewhere else where they’d been landed. I’m betting the tracks were covered pretty careful. But rockets are heavy. Manhandlin’ them, whoever was doin’ it would take the easiest way. Hm-m-m. There’s water close by over yonder. Sort of a sound in there--too narrow to be a bay. Let’s have a look. And the slopes are easiest that way, too."

He led off to the eastward. He thought of Timmy’s girl. He’d never seen her, but Timmy was going to marry her. She was on the Cerberus. It was the job of the cops to take care of whatever dilemma that ship might be in. As of here and now, it was Sergeant Madden’s job. But besides that, he thought of the way Timmy would feel if anything happened to the girl he meant to marry. As Timmy’s father, the sergeant had to do something. He wanted to do it fast. But it had to be done the right way.

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The route he chose was rocky, but it was nearly the only practicable route away from the burned-dead landing place. He climbed toward what on this planet was the east. There were pinnacles and small precipices. There were small, fleshy-leaved bushes growing out of such tiny collections of soil as had formed in cracks and crevices in the rock.

Sergeant Madden noted that one such bush was wilted. He stopped. He bent over and carefully felt of the stones about it. A small rock came out. The bush had been out of the ground before. It had carefully been replaced. By someone.

"The rockets came this way," said the sergeant, with finality. "Hauled over this pass to the Cerberus. Somebody must’ve knocked this bush loose while workin’ at getting ’em along. So he replanted it. Only not good enough. It wilted."

"Who did it?" demanded Patrolman Willis.

"Who we want to know about," growled Sergeant Madden. "Maybe Huks. Come on!"

He scrambled ahead. He wheezed as he climbed and descended. After half a mile, Patrolman Willis said abruptly:

"You figure they all left, before anybody tried to find ’em?"
The sergeant grunted affirmatively. A quarter mile still farther, the rocky ground fell away. There was the gleam of water below them. Rocky cliffs enclosed an arm of the sea that came deep into the land, here. In the cliffs rock-strata tilted insanely. There were red and yellow and black layers--mostly yellow and black. They showed in startlingly clear contrast.

"Right!" said Sergeant Madden in morose satisfaction. "I thought there might've been a boat. But this's it!"

He went down a steep descent to the very edge of the sound--it was even more like a fjord--where the waters of the ocean came in among the island's hills. On the far side, a little cascade leaped and bubbled down to join the sea.

"You go that way," commanded Sergeant Madden, "and I'll go this. We've got two things to look for--a shallow place in the water coming right up to shore. And look for signs of traffic from the cliffs to the water. By the color of those rocks, we'd ought to find both."

He lumbered away along the water's edge. There were no creatures which sang or chirped. The only sounds were wind and the lapping of waves against the shore. It was very, very lonely.

Half a mile from the point of his first descent, the sergeant found a shoal. It was a flat space of shallow water--discoverable by the color of the bottom. The water was not over four feet deep. It was a remarkably level shoal place.

He whistled on his fingers. When Patrolman Willis reached him, he pointed to the cliffs directly across the beach from the shallow water. Lurid yellow tints stained the cliff walls. Odd masses of fallen stone dotted the cliff foot. At one place they were piled high. That pile looked quite natural--except that it was at the very center of the shore line next the shoal.

"This rock's yellow," said Sergeant Madden, rumbling a little. "It's mineral. If we had a Geiger, it'd be raising hell, here. There's a mine in there. Uranium. If a ship came down on rockets, an' landed in that shoal place yonder ... why ... it wouldn't leave a burned spot comin' down or takin' off, either. Y'see?"

Patrolman Willis said: "Look here, sergeant--"

"I'm in command here," growled Sergeant Madden. "Huks didn't booby trap. Proud as hell, and touchy as all get-out, but not killers. Not crazy killers, anyhow. You go get up yonder. Up where we started down. Then go on away. Back to the squad ship. If I don't come along, anyhow you'll know what's what when the Aldeb comes."

Patrolman Willis expostulated. Sergeant Madden was firm. In the end, Patrolman Willis went away. And Sergeant Madden sat at ease and rested until he had time enough to get back to the squad ship. It was true that the Huks didn't booby trap. They hadn't had the practice, anyhow, eighty years ago. But this was a very important matter. Maybe they considered it so important that they'd changed their policy concerning this.

Wheezing a little, Sergeant Madden pulled away large stones and small ones. An opening appeared behind them. He grunted and continued his labor. Nothing happened. The mouth of a mine shaft appeared, going horizontally into the cliff.

Puffing from his exertions, Sergeant Madden went in. It was necessary if he were to make a routine examination.

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The Aldeb came in a full day later. It descended, following the space beacon the squad ship sent up from its resting place. The Aldeb was not an impressive sight, of course. It was a medium-sized police salvage ship. It had a crew of fifteen, and it was powerfully engined, and it contained a respectable amount of engineering experience and ability, plus some spare parts and, much more important, the tools with which to make others. It came down in a highly matter-of-fact fashion, and Sergeant Madden and Patrolman Willis went over to it to explain the situation.

"The Cerberus came in on rockets," rumbled the sergeant, in the salvage ship's skipper's cabin. "She landed. We found signs that some of her people came out an' strolled around lookin' for souvenirs and such. I make a guess that there was a minin' man among them, but it's only a guess. Anyhow somebody went over to where there's some parti-colored cliffs, where the sea comes away inland. And when they got to that place ... why ... there was a ship there. Then."

He paused, frowning.

"It would've been standing on an artificial shoal place, about thirty yards from a shaft that was the mouth of a mine. Uranium. And there's been a lot of uranium taken outta there! It was hauled right outta the mine shaft across the beach to the ship that was waitin'. And there's fresh work in that mine, but not a tool or a scrap of paper to tell who was workin' it. It must've been cleaned up like that every time a ship left after loadin' up. Humans wouldn't've done it. They wouldn't care. Huks would. There's not supposed to be any of them left in these parts, but I'm guessing the mine was dug by Huks, and the Cerberus was taken away by them because the humans on the Cerberus found out there was Huks around."

Patrolman Willis said: "The sergeant took a chance on the mine being booby-trapped and went in, after sending me out of range."
The sergeant scowled at him and went on.
"How it happened don't matter. Maybe somebody spotted the ship from the Cerberus as it was comin' down.
Maybe anything. But whoever run the mine found out somebody knew they were there, so they rushed the Cerberus-
-there prob'ly wasn't even a stun-pistol on board to fight with--and they put new rockets on her."

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The skipper of the salvage ship Aldeb nodded wisely.
"A ship comin' to load up minerals where there wasn't any spaceport," he observed, "would have a set of
rockets to land on, empty, and a double set to take off on, loaded. Yeah."

"They must've figured," said Sergeant Madden, "that we just couldn't make any sense out of what we found.
And if we hadn't turned up that mine, maybe never would. But anyhow they sent the Cerberus off and covered
everything up and went off to stay, themselves, until we gave up and went home."

"I wonder," said the skipper of the Aldeb, "where they took the Cerberus? That's my job!"

"Not far," grunted Sergeant Madden. "They had to be taking the Cerberus somewhere. If they just wanted to
wipe it out, after they rushed it, they coulda just set off its fuel like it'd happened in a bad landing. And that landing
was bad! If there'd been a fuel-explosion crater at the end of that burnt line on the ground, nobody'd ever've looked
further. But there wasn't. So there's a place they're takin' the Cerberus to. But it's got a brokedown drive. It can only
hobble along. They can't try to get but so far! What's the nearest sol-type star?"

The Aldeb's skipper pushed a button and the Precinct Atlas came out of its slot. The skipper punched keys and
the atlas clicked and whirred. Then its screen lighted. It showed a report on a solar system that had been fully
surveyed.

"Uh-uh," grunted the sergeant. "A survey woulda showed up if a planet was Huk-occupied. What's next
nearest?"

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Again the atlas whirred and clicked. A single line of type appeared. It said, "Sirene, 1432. Unsurveyed." The
galactic co-ordinates followed. That was all.

"This looks likely!" said the sergeant. "Unsurveyed, and off the ship lanes. It ain't between any place and any
other. It could go a thousand years and never be landed on. It's got planets."

It was highly logical. According to Krishnamurti's Law, any sol-type sun was bound to have planets of such-
and-such relative sizes in orbits of such-and-such relative distances.

"Willis and me," said the sergeant, "we'll go over and see if there's Huks there and if they've got the Cerberus.
You better get this stuff on a message-torp ready to send off if you have to. Are you going to come over to this--
Sirene 1432?"

The skipper of the Aldeb shrugged.

"Might as well. Why go home and have to come back again? There could be a lot of Huks there."

"Yeah," admitted Sergeant Madden. "I'd guess a whole planet full of 'em that laid low when the rest were
scraping with the Force. The others lost and went clean across the galaxy. These characters stayed close. I'm
guessing. But they hid their mine, here. They could've been stewing in their own juice these past eighty years,
getting set to put up a hell of a scrap when somebody found 'em. We'll be the ones to do it."

He stood up and shook himself.

"It's not far," he repeated. "Our boat's just fast enough we ought to get there a couple of days after the Cerberus
sets down. You'd ought to be five-six hours behind us." He considered. "Meet you north pole farthest planet out this
side of the sun. Right?"

"I'll look for you there," said the skipper of the Aldeb.

Sergeant Madden and Patrolman Willis went out of the salvage ship and trudged to the squad ship. They
climbed in.

"You got the co-ordinates?" asked the sergeant.

"I copied them off the atlas," said Willis.

Sergeant Madden settled himself comfortably.

"We'll go over," he grumbled, "and see what makes these Huks tick. They raised a lot of hell, eighty years ago.
It took all the off-duty men from six precincts to handle the last riot. The Huks had got together and built themselves
a fightin' fleet then, though. It's not likely there's more than one planetful of them where we're going. I thought
they'd all been moved out."

He shook his head vexedly.

"No need for 'em to have to go, except they wouldn't play along with humans. Acted like delinks, they did.
Only proud. Y'don't get mad fighting 'em. So I heard, anyway. If they only had sense you could get along with
them."
He dogged the door shut. Patrolman Willis pushed a button. The squad ship fell toward the sky. Very matter-of-factly.

On the way over, in overdrive, Sergeant Madden again dozed a great deal of the time. Sergeants do not fraternize extensively with mere patrolmen, even on assignments. Especially not very senior sergeants only two years from retirement. Patrolman Willis met with the sergeant's approval, to be sure. Timmy was undoubtedly more competent as a cop, but Timmy would have been in a highly emotional state with his girl on the Cerberus and that ship in the hands of the Huks.

Between naps, the sergeant somnolently went over what he knew about the alien race. He'd heard that their thumbs were on the outside of their hands. Intelligent nonhumans would have to have hands, and with some equivalent of opposable thumbs, if their intelligence was to be of any use to them. They pretty well had to be bipeds, too, and if they weren't warm-blooded they couldn't have the oxygen-supply that highgrade brain cells require.

There were even certain necessary psychological facts. They had to be capable of learning and of passing on what they'd learned, or they'd never have gotten past an instinctual social system. To pass on acquired knowledge, they had to have family units in which teaching was done to the young--at least at the beginning. Schools might have been invented later. Most of all, their minds had to work logically to cope with a logically constructed universe. In fact, they had to be very much like humans, in almost all significant respects, in order to build up a civilization and develop sciences and splendidly to invade space just a few centuries before humans found them.

But, said Sergeant Madden to himself, I bet they've still got armies and navies!

Patrolman Willis looked at him inquiringly, but the sergeant scowled at his own thoughts. Yet the idea was very likely. When Huks first encountered humans, they bristled with suspicion. They were definitely on the defensive when they learned that humans had been in space longer--much longer--than they had, and already occupied planets in almost fifteen per cent of the galaxy.

Sergeant Madden found his mind obscurely switching to the matter of delinks--those characters who act like adolescents, not only while they are kids, but after. They were the permanent major annoyance of the cops, because what they did didn't make sense. Learned books explained why people went delink, of course. Mostly it was that they were madly ambitious to be significant, in almost all significant respects, and didn't have the ability to matter in the only ways they could understand. They wanted to drive themselves to eminence, and frantically snatched at chances to make themselves nuisances because they couldn't wait to be important any other way.

Sergeant Madden blinked slowly to himself. When humans first took to space a lot of them were after glamour, which is the seeming of importance. His son Timmy was on the cops because he thought it glamorous. Patrolman Willis was probably the same way. Glamour is the offer of importance. An offer of importance is glamour.

The sergeant grunted to himself. A possible course of action came into his mind. He and Patrolman Willis were on the way to the solar system Sirene 1432, where Krishnamurti's Law said there ought to be something very close to a terran-type planet in either the third or fourth orbit out from the sun. That planet would be inhabited by Huks, who were very much like humans. They knew of the defeat and forced emigration of their fellow-Huks in other solar systems. They'd hidden from humans--and it must have outraged their pride. So they must be ready to put up a desperate and fanatical fight if they were ever discovered.

A squad ship with two cops in it, and a dumpy salvage ship with fifteen more, did not make an impressive force to try to deal with a planetary population which bitterly hated humans. But the cops did not plan conquest. They were neither a fighting rescue expedition nor a punitive one. They were simply cops on assignment to get the semi-freighter Cerberus back in shape to travel on her lawful occasions among the stars, and to see that she and her passengers and crew got to the destination for which they'd started. The cop's purpose was essentially routine. And the Huks couldn't possibly imagine it.

Sergeant Madden settled some things in his mind and dozed off again.

When the squad ship came out of overdrive and he was awakened by the unpleasantness of breakout, he yawned. He looked on without comment as Patrolman Willis matter-of-factly performed the tricky task of determining the ecliptic while a solar system's sun was little more than a first-magnitude star. It was wholly improbable that anything like Huk patrol ships would be out so far. It was even more improbable that any kind of detection devices would be in operation. Any approaching ship could travel several times as fast as any signal.

Patrolman Willis searched painstakingly. He found a planet which was a mere frozen lump of matter in vastness. It was white from a layer of frozen gases piled upon its more solid core. He made observations.

"I can find it again, sir, to meet the Aldeb. Orders, sir?"

"Orders?" demanded Sergeant Madden. "What? Oh. Head in toward the sun. The Huks'll be on Planet Three or Four, most likely. And that's where they'll have the Cerberus."
The squad ship continued sunward while Patrolman Willis continued his observations. A star-picture along the ecliptic. An hour's run on interplanetary drive--no overdrive field in use. Another picture. The two prints had only to be compared with a blinker for planets to stick out like sore thumbs, as contrasted with stars that showed no parallax. Sirene I--the innermost planet--was plainly close to a transit. II was away on the far side of its orbit. III was also on the far side. IV was in quadrature. There was the usual gap where V should have been. VI--it didn't matter. They'd passed VIII a little while since, a ball of stone with a frigid gas-ice covering.

Patrolman Willis worked painstakingly with amplifiers on what oddments could be picked up in space.

"It's Four, sir," he reported unnecessarily, because the sergeant had watched as he worked. "They've got detectors out. I could just barely pick up the pulses. But by the time they've been reflected back they'll be away below thermal noise-volume. I don't think even multiples could pick 'em out. I'm saying, sir, that I don't think they can detect us at this distance."

Sergeant Madden grunted.

"D'you think we came this far not to be noticed?" he asked. But he was not peevish. Rather, he seemed more thoroughly awake than he'd been since the squad ship left the Precinct substation back on Varenga IV. He rubbed his hands a little and stood up. "Hold it a minute, Willis."

He went back to the auxiliary-equipment locker. He returned to his seat beside Patrolman Willis. He opened the breech of the ejector-tube beside his chair.

"You've had street-fighting training," he said almost affably, "at the Police Academy. And siege-of-criminals courses too, eh?" He did not wait for an answer. "It's historic," he observed, "that since time began cops've been stickin' out hats for crooks to shoot at, and that crooks've been shooting, thinking there were heads in 'em."

He put a small object in the ejector tube, poked it to proper seating, and settled himself comfortably, again.

"Can you make it to about a quarter-million miles of Four," he asked cheerfully, "in one hop?"

Patrolman Willis set up the hop-timer. Sergeant Madden was pleased that he aimed the squad ship not exactly at the minute disk which was Planet IV of this system. It was prudence against the possibility of an error in the reading of distance.

"Ever use a marker, Willis?"

Patrolman Willis said: "No, sir."

Before he'd finished saying it the squad ship had hopped into overdrive and out again.

* * * * *

Sergeant Madden approved of the job. His son Timmy couldn't have done better. Here was Planet IV before them, a little off to one side, as was proper. They had run no risk of hitting in overdrive.

The distance was just about a quarter-million miles, if Krishnamurti's Law predicting the size and distance of planets in a sol-type system was reliable. The world was green and had icecaps. There should always be, in a system of this kind, at least one oxygen-planet with a nearly-terran-normal range of temperature. That usually meant green plants and an ocean or two. There wasn't quite as much sea as usual, on this planet, and therefore there were some extensive yellow areas that must be desert. But it was a good, habitable world. Anybody whose home it was would defend it fiercely.

"Hm-m-m," said Sergeant Madden. He took the ejector-tube lanyard in his hand. He computed mentally. About a quarter-million miles, say. A second and a half to alarm, down below. Five seconds more to verification. Another five to believe it. Not less than twenty altogether to report and get authority to fire. The Huks were a fighting race and presumably organized, so they'd have a chain of command and decisions would be made at the top. Army stuff, or navy. Not like the cops, where everybody knew both the immediate and final purposes of any operation in progress, and could act without waiting for orders.

It should be not less than thirty seconds before a firing key made contact down below. As a matter of history, years ago the Huks had used eighty-gravity rockets with tracking-heads and burst-bombs on them. These Huks would hardly be behind the others in equipment. And back then, too, Huks kept their rocket missiles out in orbit where they could flare into eighty-gee acceleration without wasting time getting out to where an enemy was. In their struggle against the cops two generations ago the Huks had had to learn that fighting wasn't all drama and heroics. The cops had taken the glamour out when they won. So the Huks wouldn't waste time making fine gestures now. The squad ship had appeared off their planet. It had not transmitted a code identification-signal the instant it came out of overdrive. The Huks were hiding from the cops, so they'd shoot.

"Hop on past," commanded Sergeant Madden, "the instant I jerk the ejector lanyard. Don't fool around. Over the pole will do."

Patrolman Willis set the hop-timer. Twenty seconds. Twenty-two. Three. Four. "Hop!" said Sergeant Madden. As he spoke, he jerked the lanyard.

Before the syllable was finished, Patrolman Willis pressed hard on the overdrive button. There came the
always-nauseating sensation of going into overdrive combined with the even more unpleasant sensation of coming out of it. The squad ship was somewhere else.

A vast, curving whiteness hung catercornered in the sky. It was the planet's icecap, upside down. Patrolman Willis had possibly cut it a trifle too fine.

"Right," said the sergeant comfortably. "Now swing about to go back and meet the Aldeb. But wait."

The stars and the monstrous white bowl reeled in their positions as the ship turned. Sergeant Madden felt that he could spare seconds, here. He ignored the polar regions of Sirene IV, hanging upside down to rearward from the squad ship. Even a planetary alarm wouldn't get polar-area observers set to fire in much less than forty seconds, and there'd have to be some lag in response to instrument reports. It wouldn't be as if trouble had been anticipated at just this time.

The squad ship steadied. Sergeant Madden looked with pleasurable anticipation back to where the ship had come out of overdrive and lingered for twenty-four seconds. Willis had moved the squad ship from that position, but the sergeant had left a substitute. The small object he'd dropped from the ejector tube now swelled and writhed and struggled. In pure emptiness, a shape of metal foil inflated itself. It was surprisingly large--almost the size of the squad ship. But in emptiness the fraction of a cubic inch of normal-pressure gas would inflate a foil bag against no resistance at all. This flimsy shape even jerked into motion. Released gas poured out its back. There was no resistance to acceleration save mass, which was negligible.

A sudden swirling cloud of vapor appeared where the squad ship's substitute went mindlessly on its way. The vapor rushed toward the space-marker.

A star appeared. It was a strictly temporary star, but even from a quarter-million-mile distance it was incredibly bright. It was a bomb, blasting a metal-foil flimsy which the electronic brain of a missile-rocket could only perceive as an unidentified and hence enemy object. Bomb and rocket and flimsy metal foil turned together to radioactive metal vapor.

Sergeant Madden knew professional admiration.

"Thirty-four seconds!" he said approvingly.

The Huks could not have expected the appearance of an enemy just here and now. It was the first such appearance in all the planet's history. They certainly looked for no consequences of the seizure of the Cerberus, carefully managed as that had been. So to detonate a bomb against an unexpected inimical object within thirty-four seconds after its appearance was very good work indeed.

"Hm-m-m," said Sergeant Madden, "we've nothing more to do right now, Willis. We'll go back to that hunk of ice you spotted comin' in, and wait for the Aldeb."

Patrolman Willis obediently set the hop-timer and swung the squad ship to a proper aiming. He pressed the overdrive button.

His manner, like that of Sergeant Madden, was the manner of someone conducting a perfectly routine operation.

* * * * *

"If my son Timmy were with me on this job," said Sergeant Madden, "I'd point out the inner meaning of the way we're going about handling it."

He reposed in his bucket-seat in the squad ship, which at that moment lay aground not quite right-side-up close to the north pole of Sirene VIII. The local sun was not in view. The squad ship's ports opened upon the incredible brilliance of the galaxy as seen out of atmosphere. There was no atmosphere here. It was all frozen. But there was a horizon, and the light of the stars showed the miniature jungle of gas crystals. Frozen gases--frozen to gas-ice--they were feathery. They were lacy. They were infinitely delicate. They were frost in three dimensions.

"Yes, sir," said Patrolman Willis.

"The Aldeb's due soon," said Sergeant Madden, "so I'll make it short. The whole thing is that we are cops, and the Huks are soldiers. Which means that they're after feeling important--after glamour. Every one of 'em figures it's necessary to be important. He craves it."

Patrolman Willis listened. He had a proximity detector out, which would pick up any radiation caused by the cutting of magnetic lines of force by any object. It made very tiny whining noises from time to time. If anything from a Huk missile rocket to the salvage ship Aldeb approached, however, the sound would be distinctive.

"Now that," said Sergeant Madden, "is the same thing that makes delinks. A delink tries to matter in the world he lives in. It's a small world, with only him and his close pals in it. So he struts before his pals. He don't realize that anybody but him and his pals are human. See?"

"I know!" said Patrolman Willis with an edge to his voice. "Last month a couple of delinks set a ground-truck running downhill, and jumped off it, and--"

"True," said Sergeant Madden. He rumbled for a moment. "A soldier lives in a bigger world he tries to matter
in. He's protectin' that world and being admired for it. In old, old days his world was maybe a day's march across. Later it got to be continents. They tried to make it planets, but it didn't work. But there've got to be enemies to protect a world against, or a soldier isn't important. He's got no glamour. Y'see?"

"Yes, sir," said Willis.

"Then there's us cops," said Sergeant Madden wryly. "Mostly we join up for the glamour. We think it's important to be a cop. But presently we find we ain't admired. Then there's no more glamour--but we're still important. A cop matters because he protects people against other people that want to do things to 'em. Against characters that want to get important by hurtin' 'em. Being a cop means you matter against all the delinks and crooks an' fools and murderers who'd pull down civilization in a minute if they could, just so they could be important because they did it. But there's no glamour! We're not admired! We just do our job. And if I sound sentimental, I mean it."

"Yes, sir," said Willis.

"There's a big picture in the big hall in Police Headquarters on Valdez III," said the sergeant. "It's the story of the cops from the early days when they wore helmets, and the days when they rode bicycles, and when they drove ground-cars. There's not only cops, but civilians, in every one of the panels, Willis. And if you look careful, you'll see that there's one civilian in every panel that's thumbin' his nose at a cop."

"I've noticed," said Willis.

"Remember it," said Sergeant Madden. "It bears on what we've got to do to handle these Huks. Soldiers couldn't do what we've got to. They'd fight, to be admired. We can't. It'd spoil our job. We've got to persuade 'em to behave themselves."

Then he frowned, as if he were dissatisfied with what he'd said. He shook his head and made an impatient gesture.

"No good," he said vexedly. "You can't say it. Hm-m-m ... I'll nap a while until the Aldeb gets here."

He settled back to doze.

Patrolman Willis regarded him with an odd expression. They were aground on Sirene VIII, on which no human ship had ever landed before them, and they had stirred up a hornet's nest on Sirene IV, which had orbital eighty-gee rocket missiles in orbit around it with bust bomb heads and all the other advantages of civilization. The Aldeb was on the way with a fifteen-man crew. And seventeen men, altogether, must pit themselves against an embattled planet with all its population ready and perhaps eager for war. Their errand was to secure the release of human prisoners and the surrender of a seized spaceship from a proud and desperate race.

It did not look promising. Sergeant Madden did not look like the kind of genius who could carry it through. Dozing, with his chin tilted forward on his chest, he looked hopelessly commonplace.

* * * * *

The skipper of the Aldeb came over to the squad ship, because Sergeant Madden loathed spacesuits and there was no air on Sirene VIII. Patrolman Willis watched as the skipper came wading through the lacy, breast-high gas-frost. It seemed a pity for such infinitely delicate and beautiful objects to be broken and crushed.

The sergeant unlocked the lock-door and spoke into a microphone when he heard the skipper stamping on the steel lock-flooring.

"Brush yourself off," commanded the sergeant, "and sweep the stuff outside. Part of its methane and there's some ammonia in those crystals."

There was a suitable pause. The outer door closed. The lock filled with air, and gas-crystal fragments turned to reeking vapor as they warmed. The skipper bled them out and refilled the lock. Then he came inside. He opened his face plate.

"Well?"

"There's Huks here," Sergeant Madden told him, "their hair in a braid and all set to go. They popped off a marker I stuck out for them to shoot at in thirty-four seconds by the clock. Bright boys, these Huks! They don't wait to ask questions. When they see something, they shoot at it."

The skipper tilted back his helmet and said beseechingly:

"Scratch my head, will you?"

When Patrolman Willis reached out his hand, the skipper revolved his head under it until the itchy place was scratched. Most men itch instantly they are unable to scratch. The skipper's space gloves were sprouting whiskers of moisture-frost now.

"Thanks," he said gratefully. "What are you going to do, sergeant?"

"Open communication with 'em," said the sergeant, heavily.

The skipper waited. Opening communication with someone who shoots on detector-contact may be difficult.

"I figure," rumbled the sergeant, "they're a lot like delinks. A cop can figure how they think, but they can't
figure how a cop thinks."
   "Such as?" asked the skipper.
   "They can't understand anybody not tryin' to be important," said Sergeant Madden. "It baffles 'em."
   "What's that got to do with the people on the Cerberus?" demanded the skipper. "It's our job to get them and the
   Cerberus back on the way to port!"
   "I know!" conceded Sergeant Madden, "and the girl my son Timmy's going to marry is one of them. But I don't
   think we'll have much trouble. Have you got any multipoly plastic on the Aldeb?"

   The skipper nodded, blankly. Multipoly plastic is a substance as anomalous as its name. It is a multiple polymer
   of something-or-other which stretches very accommodatingly to a surprising expanse, and then suddenly stops
   stretching. When it stops, it has a high and obstinate tensile strength. All ships carry it for temporary repairs, because
   it will seal off anything. A one-mill thickness will hold fifteen pounds pressure. Ships have been known to come
   down for landing with bubbles of multipoly glistening out of holes in their hulls. A salvage ship, especially, would
   carry an ample supply. A minor convenience in its use is the fact that a detonator-cap set off at any part of it starts a
   wave of disintegration which is too slow to be an explosion and cleans up the mess made in its application.
   "Naturally I've got it," said the skipper. "What do you want with it?"
   "The tough part," said the skipper, "is making 'em go out an ejector tube. But I've got fourteen good men. Give
   me two hours for the first batch. We'll make up the second while you're placing them."

   Sergeant Madden nodded.

   The skipper went into the lock and closed the door behind him. After a moment Patrolman Willis saw him
   wading through the incredibly delicate and fragile gas-ice crystals. Then the Aldeb's lock swallowed him.

   The odd thing about the Huk business was the minute scale of the things that happened, compared to the
   background in which they took place. The squad ship, for example, lifted off Sirene VIII for the second time. She'd
   been out once and come back for the second batch of multipoly objects. Sirene VIII was not a giant planet, by any
   means, but it was a respectable six thousand miles in diameter. The squad ship's sixty feet of length was a mote so
   minute by comparison that no comparison was possible.

   She headed in toward the sun. She winked out of existence into overdrive. She headed toward Sirene IV, in
   quadrature, where missile rockets floated in orbit awaiting the coming of any enemy. The distance to be traveled was
   roughly one and a half light-hours--some twelve astronomical units of ninety-three million miles each.

   The squad ship covered that distance in a negligible length of time. It popped into normality about two hundred
   thousand miles out from the Huk home-world. It seemed insolently to remain there. In a matter of seconds it
   appeared at another place--a hundred fifty thousand miles out, but off to one side. It seemed arrogantly to remain
   there, too--in a second place at the same time. Then it appeared, with the arbitrary effect a ship does give when
   coming out of overdrive, at a third place a hundred seventy-five thousand miles from the planet. At a fourth place
   barely eighty thousand miles short of collision with the Huk world. At a fifth place. A sixth. Each time it appeared, it
   seemed to remain in plain, challenging, insolent view, without ceasing to exist at the spots where it had appeared
   previously. In much less than a minute, the seeming of a sizable squadron of small human ships had popped out of
   emptiness and lay off the Huk home world at distances ranging from eighty thousand miles to three times as much.

   Suddenly, light flashed intolerably in emptiness. It was in contact with one of the seeming squad ships, which
   ceased to be. But immediately two more ships appeared at widely different spots. A second flash--giant and terrible
   nearby--a pin point of light among the stars. Another ostensible human ship vanished in atomic flame--but still
   another appeared magically from nowhere. A third and then a fourth flash. Three more within successive seconds.

   Squad ships continued to appear as if by necromancy, and space near the planet was streaked by flarings of
   white vapor as eighty-gee rockets hurled themselves to destruction against the invading objects. As each bomb went
   off, its light was brighter than the sun. But each was a mere flicker in enormoussness. They flashed, and flashed--
   Each was a bomb turning forty kilograms of matter into pure, raw, raging destruction. Each was devastation
   sufficient to destroy the greatest city the galaxy ever knew.

   But in that appalling emptiness they were mere scintillations. In the background of a solar system's vastness
   they made all the doings of men and Huks alike seem ludicrous.

   For a long time--perhaps five minutes, perhaps ten--the flashings which were the most terrible of all weapons
   continued. Each flash destroyed something which, in scale, was less than a dust mote. But more motes appeared, and
   more and more and more.

   And presently the flashes grew infrequent. The threads of vapor which led to each grew longer. In a little while
   they came from halfway around the planet. Then squad ships appeared even there. And immediately pin points of
   intolerable brilliance destroyed them--yet never as fast as they appeared.
Finally there came ten seconds in which no atomic flame ravened in emptiness. One more glitter. Fifteen seconds. Twenty. Thirty seconds without a flashing of atomic explosive--

The surviving objects which appeared to be squad ships hung in space. They moved without plan. They swam through space without destination. Presently the most unobservant of watches must have perceived that their movement was random. That they were not driven. That they had no purpose. That they were not squad ships but targets--and not even robot targets--set out for the missile rockets of the Huk planet to expend themselves on.

The missile rockets had expended themselves.

So Sergeant Madden opened communication with the Huks.

* * * * *

"These Huks," observed Sergeant Madden as the squad ship descended to the Huk planet's surface, "they must've had a share in the scrapping eighty years ago. They've got everything the old-time Huks had. They've even got recordings of human talk from civilian human prisoners of years gone by. And they kept somebody able to talk it--for when they fought with us!"

Patrolman Willis did not answer. He had a strange expression on his face. At the moment they were already within the Huk home-planet's atmosphere. From time to time a heavily accented voice gave curt instructions. It was a Huk voice, telling Patrolman Willis how to guide the squad ship to ground where--under truce--Sergeant Madden might hold conference with Huk authorities.

"Hold the course," said the voice. "That is r-right. Do as you are."

The horizon had ceased to be curved minutes ago. Now the ground rose gradually. The ground was green. Large green growths clustered off to one side of the flat area where the ship was to alight. They were the equivalent of trees on this planet. Undoubtedly there were equivalents of grass and shrubs, and seed-bearing and root-propagating vegetation, and Huks would make use of some seeds and roots for food. Because in order to have a civilization one has to have a larger food-supply than can be provided by even the thriftiest of grazing animals. But the Huks or their ancestors would need to have been flesh-eaters also, for brains to be useful in hunting and therefore for mental activity to be recognized as useful. A vegetarian community can maintain a civilization, but it has to start off on meat.

A clump of ground-cars waited for the squad ship's landing. The ship touched, delicately. Sergeant Madden rumbled and got out of his chair. Patrolman Willis looked at him uneasily.

"Huh!" said Sergeant Madden. "Of course you can come. You want them to think we're bluffing? No. Nothing to fight with. The Huks think our fleet's set to do the fighting."

He undogged the exit door and went out through the small vestibule which was also the ship's air lock. Patrolman Willis joined him out-of-doors. The air was fresh. The sky was blue. Clouds floated in the sky, and growing things gave off a not-unpleasant odor, and a breeze blew uncertainly. But such things happen on appropriate planets in most sol-type solar systems.

Huks came toward them. Stiffly. Defiantly. The most conspicuous difference between Huks and humans was of degree. Huks grew hair all over their heads, instead of only parts of it. But they wore garments, and some of the garments were identical and impressive, so they could be guessed to be uniforms.

"How-do," said the voice that had guided the ship down. "We are r-ready to listen to your message."

Sergeant Madden said heavily:

"We humans believe you Huks have got a good fleet. We believe you've got a good army. We know you've got good rockets and a fighting force that's worth a lot to us. We want to make a treaty for you to take over and defend as much territory as you're able to, against some characters heading this way from the Coalsack region."

Silence. The interpreter translated, and the Huks muttered astonishedly among themselves. The interpreter received instructions.

"Do you mean others of our r-race?" he demanded haughtily. "Members of our own r-race who r-return to r-recover their home worlds from humans?"

"Hell, no!" said Sergeant Madden dourly. "If you can get in contact with them and bring them back, they can have their former planets back and more besides--if they'll defend 'em. We're stretched thin. We didn't come here to fight your fleet. We came to ask it to join us."

More mutterings. The interpreter faced about.

"This surpr-rises us," he said darkly. "We know of no danger in the direction you speak of. Per-rhaps we would wish to make fr-riends with that danger instead of you!"

Sergeant Madden snorted.

"You're welcome!" Then he said sardonically: "If you're able to reach us after you try, the offer stands. Join us, and you'll give your own commands and make your own decisions. We'll co-operate with you. But you won't make friends with the characters I'm talking about! Not hardly!"
More hurried discussions still. The interpreter, defiantly: "And if we r-refuse to join you?"
Sergeant Madden shrugged.
"Nothing. You'll fight on your own, anyhow. So will we. If we joined up we could both fight better. I came to try to arrange so we'd both be stronger. We need you. You need us."

* * * * *

There was a pause. Patrolman Willis swallowed. At five-million-mile intervals, in a circle fifty million miles across with the Huk world as its center, objects floated in space. Patrolman Willis knew about them, because he and Sergeant Madden had put them there immediately after the missile rockets ceased to explode. He knew what they were, and his spine crawled at the thought of what would happen if the Huks found out. But the distant objects were at the limit of certain range for detection devices. The planet's instruments could just barely pick them up. They subtended so small a fraction of a thousandth of a second of arc that no information could be had about them.

But they acted like a monstrous space fleet, ready to pour down war-headed missiles in such numbers as to smother the planet in atomic flame. Patrolman Willis could not imagine admitting that such a supposed fleet needed another fleet to help it. A military man, bluffing as Sergeant Madden bluffed, would not have dared offer any terms less onerous than abject surrender. But Sergeant Madden was a cop. It was not his purpose to make anybody surrender. His job was, ultimately, to make them behave.

The Huks conferred. The conference was lengthy. The interpreter turned to Sergeant Madden and spoke with vast dignity and caginess:
"When do you r-require an answer?"
"We don't," grunted Sergeant Madden. "When you make up your minds, send a ship to Varenga III. We'll give you the information we've got. That's whether you fight with us or independent. You'll fight, once you meet these characters! We don't worry about that! Just ... we can do better together." Then he said: "Have you got the co-ordinates for Varenga? I don't know what you call it in your language."

"We have them," said the interpreter, still suspiciously.
"Right!" said Sergeant Madden. "That's all. We came here to tell you this. Let us know when you make up your minds. Now we'll go back."

He turned as if to trudge back to the squad ship. And this, of course, was the moment when the difference between a military and a cop mind was greatest. A military man, with the defenses of the planet smashed--or exhausted--and an apparent overwhelming force behind him, would have tried to get the Cerberus and its company turned over to him either by implied or explicit threats. Sergeant Madden did not mention them. But he had made it necessary for the Huks to do something.

They'd been shocked to numbness by the discovery that humans knew of their presence on Sirene IV. They'd been made aghast by the brisk and competent nullification of their eighty-gee rocket defenses. They'd been appalled by the appearance of a space fleet which--if it had been a space fleet--could have blasted the planet to a cinder. And then they were bewildered that the humans asked no submission--not even promises from them.

There was only one conclusion to be drawn. It was that if the humans were willing to be friendly, it would be a good idea to agree. Another idea followed. A grand gesture by Huks would be an even better idea.

"Wait!" said the interpreter. He turned. A momentary further discussion among the Huks. The interpreter turned back.

"There is a ship here," he said uneasily. "It is a human ship. There are humans in it. The ship is disabled."
Sergeant Madden affected surprise.
"Yeah? How come?"

"It ar-rived two days ago," said the interpreter. Then he plunged. "We br-ought it. We have a mine on what you call Pr-rocyron Three. The human ship landed, because it was disabled. It discovered our ship and our mine there. We wished to keep the mine secret. Because the humans had found out our secret, we br-ought them here. And the ship. It is disabled."

"Hm-m-m," said Sergeant Madden. "I'll send a repair-boat down to fix whatever's the matter with it. Of course you won't mind." He turned away, and turned back. "One of the solar systems we'd like you to take over and defend," he observed, "is Procyron. I haven't a list of the others, but when your ship comes over to Varenga it'll be ready. Talk our repair-boat down, will you? We'll appreciate anything you can do to help get the ship back out in space with its passengers, but our repair-boat can manage."

He waved his hand negligently and went back to the squad ship. He got in. Patrolman Willis followed him.
"Take her up," said Sergeant Madden.
The squad ship fell toward the sky. Sergeant Madden said satisfiably:
"That went off pretty good. From now on it's just routine."

* * * * *
There was a bubble in emptiness. It was a large bubble, as such things go. It was nearly a thousand feet in diameter, and it was made of multipoly plastic which is nearly as anomalous as its name. The bubble contained almost an ounce of helium. It had a three-inch small box at one point on its surface. It floated some twenty-five million miles from the Huk planet, and five million miles from another bubble which was its identical twin. It could reflect detector-pulses. In so doing it impersonated a giant fighting ship.

Something like an hour after the squad ship rose from Sirene IV, a detonator-cap exploded in the three-inch box. It tore the box to atoms and initiated a wave of disintegration in the plastic of the bubble. The helium bubble-content escaped and was lost. The plastic itself turned to gas and disappeared.

The bubble had been capable of exactly two actions. It could reflect detector-pulses. In doing so, it had impersonated a giant fighting ship, member of an irresistible fleet. It could also destroy itself. In so doing, it impersonated a giant fighting ship--one of a fleet--going into overdrive.

In rapid succession, all the bubbles which were members of a non-existent fighting fleet winked out of existence about Sirene IV. There were a great many of them, and no trace of any remained.

The last was long gone when a small salvage ship descended to the Huk home planet. A heavily accented voice talked it down.

The salvage ship landed amid evidences of cordiality. The Huks were extremely co-operative. They even supplied materials for the repair job on the Cerberus, including landing rockets to be used in case of need. But they weren't needed for take-off. The Cerberus had been landed at a Huk spaceport, which obligingly lifted it out to space again when its drive had been replaced.

* * * * *

And the squad ship sped through emptiness at a not easily believable multiple of the speed of light. Sergeant Madden dozed, while Patrolman Willis performed such actions as were necessary for the progress of the ship. They were very few. But Patrolman Willis thought feverishly.

After a long time Sergeant Madden waked, and blinked, and looked benignly at Patrolman Willis.

"You'll be back with your wife soon, Willis," he said encouragingly.

"Yes, sir." Then the patrolman said explosively: "Sergeant! There's nothing coming from the Coalsack way! There's nothing for the Huks to fight!"

"True, at the moment," admitted Sergeant Madden, "but something could come. Not likely--But you see, Willis, the Huks have had armed forces for a long time. They've glamour. They're not ready to cut down and have only cops, like us humans. It wouldn't be reasonable to tell 'em the truth--that there's no need for their fighting men. They'd make a need! So they'll stand guard happily against some kind of monstrosities we'll have Special Cases invent for them. They'll stand guard zestful for years and years! Didn't they do the same against us? But now they're proud that even we humans, that they were scared of, ask them to help us. So presently they'll send some Huks over to go through the Police Academy, and then presently there'll be a sub-precinct station over there, with Huks in charge, and ... why ... that'll be that."

"But they want planets--"

Sergeant Madden shrugged.

"There's plenty, Willis. The guess is six thousand million planets fit for humans in this galaxy. And by the time we've used them up, somebody'll have worked out a drive to take us to the next galaxy to start all over. There's no need to worry about that! And for immediate--does it occur to you how many men are going to start getting rich because there's a brand-new planet that's got a lot of things we humans would like to have, and wants to buy a lot of things the Huks haven't got?"

Patrolman Willis subsided. But presently he said:

"Sergeant ... what'd you have done if they hadn't told you about the Cerberus?"

Sergeant Madden snorted.

"It's unthinkable! We waltzed in there, and told them a tale, and showed every sign of walkin' right out again without askin' them a thing. They couldn't even tell us to go to hell, because it looked like we didn't care what they said. It was insupportable, Willis! Characters that make trouble, Willis, do it to feel important. And we'd left them without a thing to tell us that was important enough to mention--unless they told us about the Cerberus. We had 'em baffled. They needed to say something, and that was the only thing they could say!"

He yawned.

"The Aldeb reports everybody on the Cerberus safe and sound, only frightened, and the skipper said Timmy's girl was less scared than most. I'm pleased. Timmy's getting married, and I wouldn't want my grandchildren to have a scary mother!"

He looked at the squad ship's instruments. There was a long way yet to travel.

"A-h-h-h! It's a dull business this, overdrive," he said somnolently. "And it's amazing how much a man can
sleep when everything's in hand, and there's nothing ahead but a wedding and a few things like that. Just routine, Willis. Just routine!"

He settled himself more comfortably as the squad ship went on home.

THE END
said, "Well, what will happen to me after you show me?"
She smiled. "You still think we're going to kill you. What's your name?"
I told her, but I thought: she can't even keep a conversation going without changing the subject.
"Jak," she repeated after me. "That's a common enough name. We have Jaks among our Onist people, you know."
"No, I didn't. But you probably copied it."
"I doubt that. We were here first, Jak. Our records say so. Probably, you once captured a man with that name, long ago, liked it, and took it for your people."
"You were here first!" I sneered. "Maybe that's what your records tell you, but it isn't so. Look: the Makers endowed us with life, then went away in to the sky. By mistake they left one idiot-Maker behind, and he had nothing to do. He made you Onists before he perished, and that is why you think there is only one Maker."
She seemed highly insulted. "Idiot-Maker? Idiot! There was only one Maker, ever, but because your minds cannot conceive of all that glory residing in one figure, you invented a score."
Now it was my turn to be indignant. "A score? Hundreds, you mean; thousands--more than there are leaves on the trees."
"Well, I won't argue with you. Our war has been arguing that point well enough." I was sorry she would not argue. She looked very pretty when she argued, her breasts heaving, her eyes sparkling fire.
"What's your name?" I asked.
"Nari. My name is Nari. And don't tell me you had that name first!"
I smiled blandly. "Of course we did. I have an aunt, my mother's sister, who goes by that name. My brother's wife's cousin, also; but she is very ugly."
"And am I ugly?" Nari wanted to know. I guess in that sense at least, women are the same everywhere--Pluralist or Onist, it doesn't matter.

* * * *

I looked at her. I looked at her so hard that it made her blush, and then she looked even prettier. But I didn't tell her so.
"You will pass, for an Onist," I admitted. "I guess the Onists might consider you pretty; the Onist men might stamp their feet and shout if you go by--but then, they are Onists."
At that, she seemed on the verge of leaving my prison hut, but something made her change her mind. She stayed all morning and on into the afternoon. We argued all the time, except at midday, when she went outside to get our lunch. She stumbled a little and fell half against my shoulder. I moved toward her to hold her up, and it was the most natural thing in the world to take her in my arms and kiss her. She must have thought so, too; she responded beautifully--for an Onist.

After lunch, Nari did not mention the kiss, nor did I. It now seemed the most natural thing in the world not to talk about it. We argued some more, Nari defending her primitive beliefs, I trying to show her the light of truth. But it was no use: the war had been fought and the war would continue.
Later that day we set out. That came as a surprise to me, because I had taken it for granted that whatever the Onists wanted to show me was right here in this little village. A dozen of us went, and when we had been on the trail for some little time, Nari joined us, declaring that she wanted to see it again--whatever it was.
We went for three days, and although these Onists turned out to be better woodsmen than I had thought, still, they could not match the skill we Pluralists have mastered over the generations. I believe I could have escaped, had I wanted to; but I hardly seemed a prisoner of war, and besides, once or twice when we had lagged to the rear of the column, Nari stumbled against me like that day in the hut, and what could I do but kiss her?
It was another village we reached at the end of our march, much bigger than the first. Surprisingly, it looked a lot like a Pluralist town, although it may only have seemed so because I had been out in the woodlands for three days. They took me straightways to the village square, and it was there that I saw the statue.

* * * *

These statues of the Makers are rare, and I was surprised to see one in an Onist village. I got on my knees at once to do it reverence. I realize it was impious to look up, but I did--I had to see if it were the genuine thing. And it was, to the last detail. Constructed of the forbidden substance known as metal, it towered three times a Pluralist's height, or three times an Onist's, for that matter. I have always wondered why the Makers did not create our ancestors in their own substance, as they had fashioned us in their image. But that is an impious thought.
A stern gray-haired Onist who said he was Nari's father took me aside afterwards. "Now, Jak," he asked me, "what can you say of what you have seen?"
I shrugged. "I can say that somehow you've found one of the Maker statues. What more?"
"It's one, is it not?"
"Of course it's one. They are rare, but I have seen three, all told, in Pluralist villages."
"And each time they were separate? You never saw a group?"
"No. No, I didn't."
He slapped his hands together triumphantly. "Then that proves it. Each is a copy of the original Maker, but there was only one. Otherwise you would have seen statues in groups. And that is why you are here, Jak: we want you to go back to your people and tell them what you saw."
I shook my head. "What you say isn't logical. So what if the statues are never in pairs or groups? We've only seen a few, when once there must have been many. Also, when your artists do their magic with dyes and create portraits, are they generally done one at a time or in groups?"
"One at a time, so the artist may capture the personality in each face, naturally. I have seen group portraits, but I think they are silly things."
"Exactly." Now I was triumphant. "Exactly as the Makers thought, which is why the statues are always single--"
"But it is impious to say there was more than one Maker! He had all the knowledge in the world at his fingertips, and so there was no need for more than one. More than this world, even: he went to the stars. Or don't you believe that?"
"Of course I believe it. Only, they went to the stars, the thousands of Makers. It isn't impious, because if you can think of one being as great as that, try to picture thousands. Yes, thousands. That makes me thousands of times more pious than you Onists."
He shook his head wearily. "What's the use? It is for this we are fighting our war, and we thought if we took one of you here, showed him the undeniable truth of our statue.... Well, will you at least return to your people with a tale of what you have seen?"
I agreed readily enough: probably, the alternative was death. Although Pluralists on rare occasions have been known to take Onist women as their wives, an Onist prisoner of war was an unwanted thing. The reverse would also be true.

* * * * *
They all bid me goodbye, except for Nari. I could not find her anywhere in the village, and a little sadly I set out on my long journey back to the Sunset Land. By now our raiding party had finished its work on the small Onist village on the rim of our country, and I could do nothing but return to my people, where we might plan new strategy against the unbelievers.
But I had wanted to bid Nari farewell.
I met her in the woodlands, a travel bag slung over her shoulder like a male's. "I wanted to say goodbye privately," she told me.
"Good," I said, but I knew she was lying. Else why the travel bag?
"Goodbye," Nari whispered, but she was not looking at me. Looking, instead, behind her, at the land of her people.
"Nari," I told her, "I have to admit it. You are very pretty--even by Pluralist standards. You are--"
This time she did not stumble against me. It wasn't necessary. I drew her to me, and I kissed her a long kiss.
Then I told her I loved her, and women, I suppose, will always be women, because she said she knew it.
I will take Nari back to our village in the Sunset Land, where we will be married by the laws of my people. And if ever there is to be peace between the Pluralists and the Onists, it may, after all, come on these grounds. The Onists have their beliefs, and so I hate them for their impious thoughts. But the love of a man for a maid exists apart from that.
It won't be easy. Our arguing continued all the way back to the Sunset Land, and Nari is as stubborn as I am firm.
"There is one Maker," she said.
And I told her, "No, there are many."
Or later, as we neared the Sunset Land, we picked up the thread of our thoughts again. Pluralist or Onist, we androids are dogmatic creatures.
"One Robot created us all before he went to the stars," said Nari.
THE END
Renner had a purpose in life. And the Purpose in Life had Renner.

The star ship came out of space drive for the last time, and made its final landing on a scrubby little planet that circled a small and lonely sun. It came to ground gently, with the cushion of a retarder field, on the side of the world where it was night. In the room that would have been known as the bridge on ships of other days, instrument lights glowed softly on Captain Renner's cropped white hair, and upon the planes of his lean, strong face. Competent fingers touched controls here and there, seeking a response that he knew would not come. He had known this for long enough so that there was no longer any emotional impact in it for him. He shut off the control panel, and stood up.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "that's it. The fuel pack's gone!"

Beeson, the botanist, a rotund little man with a red, unsmiling face, squirmed in his chair.

"The engineers on Earth told us it would last a lifetime," he pointed out.

"If we were just back on Earth," Thorne, the ship's doctor, said drily, "we could tell them that it doesn't. They could start calculating again."

"But what does it mean?" David asked. He was the youngest member of the crew, signed on as linguist, and librarian to the ship.

"Just that we're stuck here--where ever that is--for good!" Farrow said bitterly.

"You won't have to run engines anymore," Dr. Thorne commented, knowing that remark would irritate Farrow.

Farrow glared at him. His narrow cheekbones and shallow eyes were shadowed by the control room lights. He was good with the engines which were his special charge, but beyond that, he was limited in both sympathy and imagination.

* * * * *

Captain Renner looked from face to face.

"We were lucky to set down safely," he said to them all. "We might have been caught too far out for a landing. It is night now, and I am going to get some rest. Tomorrow we will see what kind of a world this is."

He left the control room, and went down the corridor toward his quarters. The others watched him go. None of them made a move to leave their seats.

"What about the fuel pack?" David asked.

"Just what he said," Farrow answered him. "It's exhausted. Done for! We can run auxiliary equipment for a long time to come, but no more star drive."

"So we just stay here until we're rescued," David said.

"A fine chance for that!" Farrow's voice grew bitter again. "Our captain has landed us out here on the rim of the galaxy where there won't be another ship for a hundred years!"

"I don't understand the man," Beeson said suddenly, looking around him belligerently. "What are we doing out here anyway?"

"Extended Exploration," said Thorne. "It's a form of being put out to pasture. Renner's too old for the Service, but he's still a strong and competent man. So they give him a ship, and a vague assignment, and let him do just about what he wants. There you have it."

He took a cigar from his pocket, and looked at it fondly.

"While they last, gentlemen," he said, holding it up. He snipped the end, and lit it carefully. His own hair had grown grey in the Service, and, in a way, the reason for his assignment to the ship was the same as Renner's.

"I think," he said slowly, "that Captain Renner is looking for something."

"But what?" Beeson demanded. "He has taken us to every out-of-the-way, backward planet on the rim. And what happens? We land. We find the natives. We are kind to them. We teach them something, and leave them a few supplies. And then Renner loses interest, and we go on!"

"Perhaps it is for something in himself," David offered.

"Perhaps he will find it here," Thorne murmured. "I'm going to bed."

He got up from his seat.
David stood up, and went over to one of the observation ports. He ran back the radiation screen. The sky outside was very black, and filled with alien stars. He could see absolutely nothing of the landscape about them because of the dark. It was a poor little planet. It hadn't even a moon.

In the morning they opened up the ship, and let down the landing ramps. It was a very old world that they set foot upon. Whatever mountains or hills it had ever had, had long ago been leveled by erosion, so that now there was only a vaguely undulating plain studded with smooth and rounded boulders. The soil underfoot was packed and barren, and there was no vegetation for as far as they could see.

But the climate seemed mild and pleasant, the air warm and dry, with a soft breeze blowing. It was probable that the breeze would be always with them. There were no mountains to interfere with its passage, or alter its gentle play.

Off to one side, a little stream ran crystal clear over rocks and gravel. Dr. Thorne got a sample bottle from the ship, and went over to it. He touched his fingers to the water, and then touched them to his lips. Then he filled the sample bottle from the stream, and came back with it.

"It seems all right," he said. "I'll run an analysis of it, and let you know as soon as I can."

He took the bottle with him into the ship.

* * * * *

Beeson stood kicking at the ground with the toe of his boot. His head was lowered.

"What do you think of it?" Renner asked.

Beeson shrugged. He knelt down and felt of the earth with his hands. Then he got out a heavy-bladed knife and hacked at it until he had pried out a few hard pieces. He stood up again with these in his hands. He tried to crumble them, but they would not crumble. They would only break into bits like sun-dried brick.

"It's hard to tell," he said. "There seems to be absolutely no organic material here. I would say that nothing has grown here for a long, long time. Why, I don't know. The lab will tell us something."

Renner nodded.

For the rest of the day they went their separate ways; Renner to his cabin to make the entries that were needed when a flight was ended, even though that ending was not intentional; Beeson to prowling along the edge of the stream and pecking at the soil with a geologist's pick; and Farrow to his narrow little world of engines where he worked at getting ready the traction machines and other equipment that would be needed.

David set out on a tour of exploration toward the furthermost nests of boulders. It was there that he found the first signs of vegetation. In and around some of the larger groups of rocks, he found mosses and lichens growing. He collected specimens of them to take back with him. It was out there, far from the ship, that he saw the first animate life.

When he returned, it was growing toward evening. He found that the others had brought tables from the ship, and sleeping equipment, and set it up outside. Their own quarters would have been more comfortable, but the ship was always there for their protection, if they needed it, and they were tired of its confinement. It was a luxury to sleep outdoors, even under alien stars.

Someone had brought food from the synthetizer, and arranged it on a table. They were eating when he arrived. He handed the specimens of moss and lichen to Captain Renner, who looked at them with interest, and then passed them on to Beeson for his study.

"Sir?" David said.

"What is it, David?" Captain Renner asked.

"I think there are natives here," David said. "I believe that I saw one."

Renner's eyes lit up with interest. He laid down his knife and fork.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"It was just a glimpse," David said, "of a hairy face peering around a rock. It looked like one of those pictures of a cave man one used to see in the old texts."

Renner stood up. He moved a little way away, and stood staring out into the growing dark, across the boulder-studded plain.

"On a barren planet like this," he said, "they must lack so many things!"

"I'd swear he almost looks happy," Dr. Thorne whispered to the man next to him. It happened to be Farrow.

"Why shouldn't he be?" Farrow growled, his mouth full of food. "He's got him a planet to play with! That's what he's been aiming for--wait and see!"

* * * * *

The next few days passed swiftly. Dr. Thorne found the water from the little stream not only to be potable, but extremely pure.

Farrow got his machinery unloaded and ready to run. Among other things, there was a land vehicle on light
caterpillar treads capable of running where there were no roads and carrying a load of several tons. And there was an out-and-out tractor with multiple attachments.

Beeson was busy in his laboratory working on samples from the soil.

David brought in the one new point that was of interest. He had been out hunting among the boulders again, and it was almost dark when he returned. He told Renner about it at the supper table, with the others listening in.

"I think the natives eat the lichen," he said.

"I haven't seen much else they could eat," Beeson muttered.

"There's more of the lichen than you might think," David said, "if you know where to look for it. But, even at that, there isn't very much. The thing is, it looks like it's been cropped. It's never touched if the plants are small, or half grown, or very nearly ready. But just as soon as a patch is fully mature, it is stripped bare, and there never seems to be any of it dropped, or left behind, or wasted."

"If that's all they have to live on," Thorne said, "they have it pretty thin!"

The natives began to be seen nearer to the camp. At first there were just glimpses of them, a hairy face or head seen at the edge of a rock, or the sight of a stocky figure dashing from boulder to boulder. As they grew braver, they came out more into the open. They kept their distance, and would disappear into the rocks if anyone made a move toward them, but, if no attention was paid them, they moved about freely.

In particular, they would come, each evening, to stand in a ragged line near one of the nests of boulders. From there, they would watch the crewmen eat. There were never more than twelve or fifteen of them, a bandy-legged lot, with thick, heavy torsos, and hairy heads.

It was on one of these occasions that Dr. Thorne happened to look up.

"Oh, oh!" he said. "Here it comes!"

Renner turned his head, and rose to his feet. The other men rose with him.

Three of the natives were coming toward the camp. They came along at a swinging trot, a sense of desperation and dedicated purpose in their manner. One ran slightly ahead. The other two followed behind him, shoulder to shoulder.

Farrow reached for a ray gun in a pile of equipment near him, and raised it.

"No weapons!" Captain Renner ordered sharply.

Farrow lowered his arm, but kept the gun in his hand.

The natives drew near enough for their faces to be seen. The leader was casting frightened glances from side to side and ahead of him as he came. The other two stared straight ahead, their faces rigid, their eyes blank with fear.

They came straight to the table. There they reached out suddenly, and caught up all the food that they could carry in their hands, and turned and fled with it in terror into the night.

Somebody sighed in relief.

"Poor devils!" Renner said. "They're hungry!"

* * * * *

There was a conference the following morning around one of the tables.

"We've been here long enough to settle in," Renner said. "It's time we started in to do something for this planet." He looked toward Beeson. "How far have you gotten?" he asked.

* * * * *

Beeson was, as usual, brisk and direct.

"I can give you the essentials," he said. "I can't tell you the whole story. I don't know it. To be brief, the soil is highly nitrogen deficient, and completely lacking in humus. In a way, the two points tie in together." He looked about him sharply, and then went on. "The nitrates are easily leached from the soil. Without the bacteria that grow around certain roots to fix nitrogen and form new nitrates, the soil was soon depleted."

"As to the complete lack of organic material, I can hazard only a guess. Time, of course. But, back of that, probably the usual history of an overpopulation, and a depleted soil. At the end, perhaps they ate everything, leaves, stems and roots, and returned nothing to the earth."

"The nitrates are replaceable?" Renner asked.

Beeson nodded.

"The nitrates will have formed deposits," he said, "probably near ancient lakes or shallow seas. It shouldn't be too hard to find some."

Renner turned to Farrow.

"How about your department?" he asked.

"I take it we're thinking of farming," Farrow said. "I've got equipment that will break up the soil for you. And I can throw a dam across the stream for water."

"There are seeds in the ship," Renner said, his eyes lighting with enthusiasm. "We'll start this planet all over
"There's still one thing," Beeson reminded him drily. "Humus! Leaves, roots, organic material! Something to loosen up the soil, aerate it. Nothing will grow in a brick."

Renner stood up. He took a few slow paces, and then stood looking out at the groups of boulders studding the ancient plain.

"I see," he said. "And there's only one place to get it. We'll have to use the lichens and the mosses."

"There'll be trouble with the natives if you do," Thorne said.

Renner looked at him. He frowned thoughtfully. "You'll be taking their only food," the doctor pointed out. "We can feed them from the synthetizer," Renner answered. "We know that they will eat it."

"Why bother?" Farrow asked sourly.

Renner turned on him. "Will the synthetizer handle it?" he asked.

"I guess so," Farrow grumbled. "For a while, at least. But I don't see what good the natives are to us."

"If we take their food," Renner said, "we're going to feed them. At least until such time as the crops come in, and they are able to feed themselves!"

"Are you building this planet for us, or for them?" Farrow demanded.

Renner turned away.

They put out cannisters of food for the natives that night. In the morning it was gone. Each evening, someone left food for them near their favorite nest of rocks. The natives took it in the dark, unseen.

Gradually, Captain Renner himself took over the feeding. He seemed to derive a personal satisfaction from it. Gradually, too, the natives began coming out into the open to receive it. Before long, they were waiting for him every evening as he brought them food.

The gathering of the lichen began. They picked it by hand, working singly or in pairs, searching out the rocks and hidden places where it grew. From time to time they would catch glimpses of the natives watching them from a distance. They were careful not to get close.

On one of these occasions, Captain Renner and David were working together.

"Do they have a language?" Captain Renner asked.

"Yes, sir," David answered. "I have heard them talking among themselves."

"Do you suppose you can learn it?" Renner asked. "Do you think you could get near enough to them to listen in?"

"I could try," David offered.

"Then do so," Renner said. "That's an assignment."

Thereafter David went out alone. He found that getting close to the natives was not too difficult. He tried to keep out of their sight, while still getting near enough to them to hear their voices. They were undoubtedly aware of his presence, but, with the feeding, they had lost their fear of the men, and did not seem to care.

Bit by bit he learned their language, starting from a few key roots and sounds. It was a job for which he had been trained.

Time passed rapidly, and the work went on. Captain Renner let his beard grow. It came out white and thick, and he did not bother to trim it. The others, too, became more careless in their dress, each man following his own particular whim. There was no longer need for a taut ship.

Farrow threw a dam across the little stream, and, while the water grew behind it, went on to breaking up the soil with his machines. Beeson searched for nitrate, and found it. He brought a load of it back, and this, together with the moss and lichen, was chopped into the soil. In the end, it was the lichen that was the limiting factor. There was only so much of it, so the size of the plot that they could prepare was small.

"But it's a start," Renner said. "That's all we can hope for this first year. This crop will furnish more material to be chopped back into the soil. Year by year it will grow until the inhabitants here will have a new world to live in!"

"What do you expect to get out of it?" Farrow asked bitingly.

Renner's eyes glowed with an inner light.

Renner's beard grew with the passing months until it became a luxuriant thing. He let his hair go untrimmed too, so that, with his tall, spare figure, he took on a patriarchal look. And, with the passing months, there came that time which was to be spring for this planet. The first green blades of the new planting showed above the ground.

The natives noticed it with awe, and kept a respectful distance.

That evening, when it was time for the natives' feeding, the men gathered about. Little by little the feeding had
become a ritual, and they would often go out to watch it. It was always the same. Renner would step forward away from the others a little way, the load of food in his hands. The natives would come to stand before him in their ragged line, their leader a trifle to the front. There they would bow, and begin a chant that had become a part of the ritual with the passing time.

With the first green planting showing, there was a look of deep satisfaction in Renner's eyes as he stepped forward this night. His hair had grown quite long by now, and his white beard blew softly in the constant wind. There was a simple dignity about him as he stood there, his head erect, and looked upon the natives as his children.

The natives began their chant. It became louder.
"Tolava--" they said, and bowed.

As usual, Farrow was nettled.
"What does the man want anyway?" he asked out loud. "To be God?"

Renner could not help but hear him. He did not turn his head.
"David!" he said.
"Sir?" David asked, stepping forward.
"You understand their language now, don't you?" Renner asked.
"Yes, sir," David said.
"Then translate!" Renner ordered. "Out loud, please, so that the others may hear!"
"Tolava--" the natives chanted, bowing.
"Tolava--our father," David said, following the chant. Suddenly he swallowed, and hesitated for a moment. Then he straightened himself, and went sturdily on. "Tolava--our father--who art from the heavens--give us--this day--our bread!"

THE END

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**Contents**

**PLANET OF DREAMS**  
By James McKimmey, Jr.

The climate was perfect, the sky was always blue, and--best of all--nobody had to work. What more could anyone want?

It was a small world, a tiny spinning globe, placed in the universe to weather and age by itself until the end of things. But because its air was good and its earth was fertile, Daniel Loveral had placed a finger upon a map and said, "This is the planet. This is the Dream Planet."

That was two years before, back on Earth. And now Loveral with his selected flock had shot through space, to light like chuckling geese upon the planet, to feel the effect of their dreams come true.

Loveral was sitting in his office, drumming his long fingers against his desk while the name, Atkinson, ticked through his brain like the sound of a sewing machine.

Would he be the only one, Loveral asked himself, or was he just the first? In either case, it was up to Loveral, as leader and guiding hand, to stop this thing and stop it quickly.

Loveral stood up and put on his jacket, although there was no need for it, other than the formality it gave his figure.

He stepped out of his office into a bright clear day, where the air was clean and fresh in his lungs, at once like frost and fire and sweet perfume. He walked along a winding path, which was bordered by slim-necked flowers and a short hedge whose even clipped lines were kept neat by tireless robot hands.

Trees pointed to a blue sky, rocking and fluttering their leaves in a soft breeze, and glinting metallic houses lay peacefully beyond in wooded hollows and upon slight hills.

A whole small world was before his eyes, set there upon his direction, maintained by himself with the help of a dozen complex machines which lay locked and sealed in the Maintenance Room for only his fingers to touch.

It was a busy life for Loveral, up at dawn to work until deep night, keeping his flock happy and free from spirit-killing labor. But it was a perfect plan, one which had been tested and turned in his mind for years. If he had to work hard to keep it running smoothly, that was all right. In fact, he had never been happier.

Now, however, there was this business about Atkinson. Loveral was disturbed about that.

He walked on, over the quiet path which would lead to the house where Atkinson and his wife lived. Loveral
smiled, in readiness for any happy face that might appear before him, to greet him, to show with thankful eyes appreciation for his wonderful world. But that, too, brought thoughts that were a bit disturbing.

Lately there had been few such faces. Most of his flock no longer seemed to care about walking along the cultivated paths, or smiling, or nodding, or touching a leaf here or a flower there. They preferred, it appeared, to remain deep inside their houses, as though they might have become tired of the soft perfection of Dream Planet. As though they might have become weary of quiet woods and sweet bird-music or a sky which was always blue.

Loveral shook his head as he walked, puzzling out his thoughts. It was strange, but nothing to worry about certainly.

Just this business about Atkinson. That was his only worry.

He came slowly up a hill, the top of which held a low curving house, with a silver roof and wide, sweeping windows. There were yellow and blue and deep red flowers, skirting the sides of the house, and green ivy grew thickly between the glistening windows. The lawn, dotted with small leafy trees and round bushes, sloped down from the front of the house, looking like a carefully arranged painting.

Loveral pressed a button beside a shining door and waited, smiling through his pale blue kindly eyes.

Mrs. Atkinson appeared after several moments and stood blinking at him. She was a thin woman, who seemed to have gotten even thinner, Loveral noticed. She was working her fingers at the neck of her dress. She smiled but her lips wavered.

"My dear," Loveral greeted her in his soft voice, showing the goodness in his eyes.

She nodded her recognition, opening her mouth without speaking.

"May I?" said Loveral finally, waving his long fingers toward the living room.

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "Of course, Mr. Loveral." And as she spoke Loveral had the impression she might suddenly begin crying.

Loveral followed the woman into the house, noticing all over again the precise way everything had been arranged. The rug was soft beneath his feet, and the light came in through the windows in such a way that it, too, became soft. The furniture, molded to hold a human body most comfortably, rested about the room in perfect efficiency.

"Your place is so lovely," Loveral said, out of his old habit from Earth. But his words seemed to ring strangely in the quiet, because it was his own arrangement, like all the other rooms on the planet. And Mrs. Atkinson, standing thin and nervous before him, had nothing, after all, to do with it. The cleanliness was the work of his robot machines, the planning his own. It was like complimenting himself.

He cleared his throat and stood, smiling his most benevolent smile to reassure Mrs. Atkinson.

"Ah, my dear. Is George about?"

Again, the woman's hand skittered to her throat.

"He's not ill, surely?" Loveral asked, although this, too, was silly, because foods, selected and prepared for utmost nutrition, packed and frozen to be doled out in weekly quantities, purified air, disease-killing serums, simply written folders on exercise, and of course Loveral's own philosophies of quiet, peaceful living--all of this guarded well the health of Dream Planet's flock.

The woman shook her head. "No, George is fine. He's just--sleeping, I think."

"Rest is nature's finest tonic," said Loveral, and hearing his voice thought suddenly there was hardly anything he could say any more that might not sound a bit out of place in this peaceful world. Rest to the man who had nothing to do ceased to be a tonic.

"Yes, yes," said Loveral. "May we just sit down, my dear?"

Mrs. Atkinson jerked a hand toward one of the chairs and then wound her fingers.

Loveral sat down and leaned back, smiling his most charming smile. "Perhaps George might awaken after a bit?"

"Oh, yes," the woman said, her eyes flickering, and she sat upon the edge of one chair, like a bird perched upon a thin wire.

Loveral waited, legs crossed, leaning his head back against the silken softness of the chair. It was so good to relax these days. The business of watching and of caring for his flock was trying. When you have brought an entire community of people at great expense through space, guaranteeing to give them a life of constant comfort and ease, so that they might dream and think as they wander through the flowers and the leaves, their thoughts cleansed of worry about work and responsibility, then you have a job. Loveral was most busy, busier than his heritage of wealth ever before had allowed, seeing to all of this.

But he also was most content--with everything except Atkinson.

Mrs. Atkinson teetered on the edge of her chair, as though she might at any moment go flying across the room.
in a crazy gyration. There was something about her eyes, Loveral noticed, while he peacefully nodded in the chair. Fear, perhaps.

If so, he probably had been right. He tightened himself, listening. There it was again. The sound. Just as he had heard it a day before when he had passed near the house. He leaned forward quickly.

Mrs. Atkinson jumped.

"Didn't I hear a noise of some sort, my dear?"

"Noise?" the woman said, as though her own voice were the sound of an echo.

"An odd noise," Loveral said, his eyes searching.

The woman's hands fluttered about her dress.

Loveral stood up. "Would you mind if I just glanced about, my dear?"

The woman didn't answer, but Loveral was already moving across the room toward a door. He opened it and walked down a hall. The noise grew stronger. He threw open another door.

* * * * *

He stood watching while George Atkinson spun around, dark eyes flashing, hair tousled. There was a two days' growth of beard darkening Atkinson's face.

"Why, George," Loveral said, swiftly examining the litter of metal and wood which was spread over a table behind Atkinson. There was a home-made hammer in Atkinson's hand. "What have we here, George?"

"Something for you," Atkinson said, tightening his fingers about the handle of the hammer.

Loveral grinned his famous Loveral grin. "That's fine. What could it be?"

"None of your damned business."

"George," Loveral said, his smile still white but his eyes narrow and quick.

The woman was behind them. Her voice screeched. "George, I told you. Why didn't you listen, George? You should have listened to me. You--"

Loveral held up a hand, still watching Atkinson. "Now tell me, George, what is it you're making for me?"

Atkinson raised the hammer slightly.

Loveral stood very still. "That's a nice hammer, George."

Atkinson's eyes were black beneath his thick brows.

"You made that, didn't you?" Loveral asked.

"Yes, I made that," Atkinson said. "I made that and I made something else. Another minute and I'll have that finished, too."

"George," said Loveral, stepping quietly forward, "I don't like to say this, of course. You've been one of our very best members. But nobody works here, George. We can't allow that. You know the rules."

"I know the rules, all right."

"Well, then," Loveral said, extending his hand toward the hammer, "we'll just destroy this and whatever else you might have been making. We'll just forget it ever happened. We'll get along real fine that way, George. We'll just be such good friends."

"We'll just go to hell," said Atkinson, snatching his hammer away.

Loveral's smile disappeared. "I'll tell you, George. I have to mean business with this. You know the reasons. If we allow anybody to work here, then there's going to be trouble. That isn't our plan. We're here to grow within ourselves and expand culturally. Not to commercialize a beautiful world like Dream Planet."

Atkinson stood unmovving, and Loveral could see the way the man's muscles were tight, like steel springs, and the way his eyes burned deep inside their blackness.

"We've given you everything you need," Loveral explained, trying to adjust the smile on his lips again. "Everybody has everything they want. But, you see, if you sit there and work and make something that someone else doesn't have, then the whole system is destroyed. Then someone will want what you've made. We'll have jealousy and hatred and fighting. This is the stuff of which wars are made, George. You know that. It starts with small things like this, but it grows. When it does, the structure of our life here will collapse. You wouldn't want that, would you, George?"

"Yes!" Atkinson said, his mouth white at the edges. "I'd like to see the whole rotten thing collapsed and blown to hell!"

Loveral's teeth snapped together and his lips grew tight. He could feel a muscle jumping along his neck.

Atkinson looked at him with furious eyes. "What do you think it's like, living this way? You're busy working twenty-four hours a day, while we wander around this damned prison like the breathing dead. You can feel sweat and aches in your bones from a hard day's work. Sleep is like medicine to you, instead of another stretch of torture. You can forget your own brain for a while by doing something with your hands. You can relax because you can get tired. Not us, by God. Not us!"
"I envy you, George," Loveral said through his teeth.
"Oh, like hell you do. You treat us like we were helpless infants. You feed and clothe us and do all our work, and you're so happy you damned near split your guts."
"I'll take that, if you don't mind," Loveral said, reaching for the hammer, his voice suddenly icy cold.
Atkinson slammed back against the table. "No, you won't. You won't take anything more at all. You've taken our spirit and our pride and the strength right out of our spines. You won't take anything more!"
"George?" Loveral said, but not moving any further.
Atkinson slid the hammer back of him onto the table, and his hands were searching among a dozen scattered pieces of metal and wood. He watched Loveral as he worked. "Let me show you what else I've made," he said.
"I'd hate to do it," Loveral said, "but I can stop your food, your water, everything."
Atkinson's hands moved swiftly, assembling the pieces. He nodded. "You can, but you won't."
"I have the only keys to the storage units. I control everything, George."
"Correction," said Atkinson, holding an assembled revolver in his hands. "You did."

Loveral looked at what Atkinson had in his hands. He blinked.
"You're nearly dead," Atkinson said.
Loveral looked at Atkinson, into his eyes. "If you wanted to kill me, you could have done it some other way."
Atkinson shook his head. "Just this way. Just with something that took me dozens of days and nights to make. With something that made me sweat and swear to get. It was difficult--with no tools or proper materials--but that made it all the better. Now I've got it finished," he said, pushing a bullet into the chamber, "and ready to use."
Loveral stood frozen, then he turned. "My dear," he said to the woman who moved her mouth as though her voice had been pumped out of her. He reached to touch her shoulder. She recoiled, as though his fingers held poison.
"George," he said, turning back to the black-eyed man.

"This is a great moment," Atkinson said, lifting the muzzle of the revolver. "When I squeeze the trigger, it'll be like blowing the lock off a prison door. I'll go yelling to the others, and we'll smash down the whole goddamned place. We'll smash it down, so we'll have to rebuild it. We'll pull apart every robot you've got. We'll tear apart the food lockers and have a celebration for a week, and when we've gotten sick from too much food, we'll start growing some more with our own hands. We'll make forges for the men and looms for the women. We'll burn our clothes and make new ones. We'll grow corn in the fields. We'll pump water from the ground. You're finished, Loveral."
Loveral stared at the revolver. "George," he said, pleading. "The plans. The beautiful, beautiful plans. All of you, you all wanted peace and contentment. Time to think and dream. You all wanted to get away from the work and the worry and the responsibility. You--"
Atkinson fired the gun into Loveral's stomach.
Loveral gestured at the air and fell to his knees. Atkinson threw his gun through a window and grabbed his wife by the hand. "Hurry!" he said, laughing. "Hurry!"
Loveral felt of the blood on his shirt and rested on his knees. He could hear footsteps, racing through the house and out to the yard. He held out his bloody hand and looked at it. Atkinson's voice pealed through the warm clear air. "He's dead! Loveral's dead!"
There was a sound of sudden activity, and everywhere went the cry, "Loveral's dead!"
Loveral sank to his haunches and opened his lips. The blood was there, too. He could hear the shouts and the laughter, and then the tearing of steel, the smashing of glass. He bent over his knees, trembling with a sudden chill.
The sound of destruction grew like thunder. "Why?" he said in his dying throat. "Oh, why? It was what they said they wanted."
THE END
"No. What's that got to do with it?"

Dr. Bird tossed across the table a copy of the Washington Post folded so as to bring uppermost an item on page three. Carnes saw his picture staring at him from the center of the page.

"What the dickens?" he exclaimed as he bent over the sheet. With growing astonishment he read that Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service had collapsed at his desk that afternoon and had been rushed to Walter Reed Hospital where the trouble had been diagnosed as a nervous breakdown caused by overwork. There followed a guarded statement from Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, who had been called into conference by the army authorities.

The Admiral stated that the Chief of the Washington District was in no immediate danger but that a prolonged rest was necessary. The paper gave a glowing tribute to the detective's life and work and stated that he had been given sick leave for an indefinite period and that he was leaving at once for the fishing lodge of his friend, Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards, at Squapan Lake, Maine. Dr. Bird, the article concluded, would accompany and care for his stricken friend. Carnes laid aside the paper with a gasp.

* * * * *

"Do you know what all this means?" Carnes demanded.

"It means, Carnsey, old dear, that the fishing at Squapan Lake should be good right now and that I feel the need of accurate information on the subject. I didn't want to go alone, so I engineered this outrage on the government and am taking you along for company. For the love of Mike, look sick from now on until we are clear of Washington. We leave to-night. I already have our tickets and reservations and all you have to do is to collect your tackle and pack your bags for a month or two in the woods and meet me at the Pennsy station at six to-night."

"And yet there are some people who say there is no Santa Claus," mused Carnes. "If I had really broken down from overwork, I would probably have had my pay docked for the time I was absent, but a man with official pull in this man's government wants to go fishing and presto! the wheels move and the way is clear. Doctor, I'll meet you as directed."

"Good enough," said Dr. Bird. "By the way, Carnes," he went on as the operative opened the door, "bring your pistol."

Carnes whirled about at the words.

"Are we going on a case?" he asked.

"That remains to be seen," replied the Doctor enigmatically. "At all events, bring your pistol. In answer to any questions, we are going fishing. In point of fact, we are—with ourselves as bait. If you have a little time to spare this afternoon you might drop around to the office of the Post and get them to show you all the amnesia cases they have had stories on during the past three months. They will be interesting reading. No more questions now, old dear, we'll have lots of time to talk things over while we are in the Maine woods."

* * * * *

Late the next evening they left the Bangor and Aroostook train at Mesardis and found a Ford truck waiting for them. Over a rough trail they were driven for fifteen miles, winding up at a log cabin which the Doctor announced was his. The truck deposited their belongings and jounced away and Dr. Bird led the way to the cabin, which proved to be unlocked. He pushed open the door and entered, followed by Carnes. The operative glanced at the occupants of the cabin and started back in surprise.

Seated at a table were two figures. The smaller of the two had his back to the entrance but the larger one was facing them. He rose as they entered and Carnes rubbed his eyes and reeled weakly against the wall. Before him stood a replica of Dr. Bird. There was the same six feet two of bone and muscle, the same beetling brows and the same craggy chin and high forehead surmounted by a shock of unruly black hair. In face and figure the stranger was a replica of the famous scientist until he glanced at their hands. Dr. Bird's hands were long and slim with tapering fingers, the hands of a thinker and an artist despite the acid stains which disfigured them but could not hide their beauty. The hands of his double were stained as were Dr. Bird's, but they were short and thick and bespoke more the man of action than the man of thought.

The second figure arose and faced them and again Carnes received a shock. While the likeness was not so striking, there was no doubt that the second man would have readily passed for Carnes himself in a dim light or at a little distance. Dr. Bird burst into laughter at the detective's puzzled face.

"Carnes," he said, "shake yourself together and then shake hands with Major Trowbridge of the Coast Artillery Corps. It has been said by some people that we favor one another."

"I'm glad to meet you, Major," said Carnes. "The resemblance is positively uncanny. But for your hands, I would have trouble telling you two apart."

* * * * *

The Major glanced down at his stubby fingers.
"It is unfortunate but it can't be helped," he said. "Dr. Bird, this is Corporal Askins of my command. He is not as good a second to Mr. Carnes as I am to you but you said it was less important."

"The likeness is plenty good enough," replied the Doctor. "He will probably not be subjected to as close a scrutiny as you will. Did you have any trouble in getting here unobserved?"

"None at all, Doctor. Lieutenant Maynard found a good landing field within a half mile of here, as you said he would, and he has his Douglass camouflaged and is standing by. When do you expect trouble?"

"I have no idea. It may come to-night or it may come later. Personally I hope that it comes later so that we can get in a few days of fishing before anything happens."

"What do you expect to happen, Doctor?" demanded Carnes. "Every time I have asked you anything you told me to wait until we were in the Maine woods and we are there now. I read up everything that I could find on amnesia victims during the past three months but it didn't throw much light on the matter to me."

"How many cases did you find, Carnes?"

"Sixteen. There may have been lots more but I couldn't find any others in the Post records. Of course, unless the victim were a local man, or of some prominence, it wouldn't appear."

"You got most of them at that. Did any points of similarity strike you as you read them?"

"None except that all were prominent men and all of them mental workers of high caliber. That didn't appear peculiar because it is the man of high mentality who is most apt to crack."

"Undoubtedly. There were some points of similarity which you missed. Where did the attacks take place?"

"Why, one was at--Thunder, Doctor! I did miss something. Every case, as nearly as I can recall, happened at some summer camp or other resort where they were on vacation."

"Correct. One other point. At what time of day did they occur?"

"In the morning, as well as I can remember. That point didn't register."

"They were all discovered in the morning, Carnes, which means that the actual loss of memory occurred during the night. Further, every case has happened within a circle with a diameter of three hundred miles. We are near the northern edge of that circle."

*C * * *

Carnes checked up on his memory rapidly.

"You're right, Doctor," he cried. "Do you think--?"

"Once in a while," replied Dr. Bird dryly, "I think enough to know the futility of guesses hazarded without complete data. We are now located within the limits of the amnesia belt and we are here to find out what did happen, if anything, and not to make wild guesses about it. You have the tent set up for us, Major?"

"Yes, Doctor, about thirty yards from the cabin and hidden so well that you could pass it a dozen times a day without suspecting its existence. The gas masks and other equipment which you sent to Fort Banks are in it."

"In that case we had better dispense with your company as soon as we have eaten a bite, and retire to it. On second thought, we will eat in it. Carnes, we will go to our downy couches at once and leave our substitutes in possession of the cabin. I trust, gentlemen, that things come out all right and that you are in no danger."

Major Trowbridge shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It is as the gods will," he said sententiously. "It is merely a matter of duty to me, you know, and thank God, I have no family to mourn if anything does go wrong. Neither has Corporal Askins."

"Well, good luck at any rate. Will you guide Carnes to the tent and then return here and I'll join him?"

*C * * *

Huddled in the tiny concealed tent, Dr. Bird handed Carnes a haversack on a web strap.

"This is a gas mask," he said. "Put it on your neck and keep it ready for instant use. I have one on and one of us must wear a mask continually while we are here. We'll change off every hour. If the gas used is lethane, as I suspect, we should be able to detect it before its gets too concentrated, but some other gas might be used and we must take no chances. Now look here."

With the aid of a flash-light he showed Carnes a piece of apparatus which had been set up in the tent. It consisted of two telesopic barrels, one fitted with an eye-piece and the other, which was at a wide angle to the first, with an objective glass. Between the two was a covered round disc from which projected a short tube fitted with a protecting lens. This tube was parallel to the telesopic barrel containing the objective lens.

"This is a new thing which I have developed and it is getting its first practical test to-night," he said. "It is a gas detector. It works on the principle of the spectroscope with modifications. From this projector goes out a beam of invisible light and the reflections are gathered and thrown through a prism of the eye-piece. While a spectroscope requires that the substance which it examines be incandescent and throw out visible light rays in order to show the typical spectral lines, this device catches the invisible ultra-violet on a fluorescent screen and analyzes it spectroscopically. Whoever has the mask on must continually search the sky with it and look for the three bright
lines which characterize lethane, one at 230, one at 240 and the third at 670 on the illuminated scale. If you see any bright lines in those regions or any other lines that are not continually present, call my attention to it at once. I'll watch for the first hour."

At the end of an hour Dr. Bird removed his mask with a sigh of relief and Carnes took his place at the spectroscope. For half an hour he moved the glass about and then spoke in a guarded tone.

"I don't see any of the lines you told me to look for," he said, "but in the southwest I get wide band at 310 and two lines at about 520."

Dr. Bird advanced toward the instrument but before he reached it, Carnes gave an exclamation.

"There they are, Doctor!" he cried.

Dr. Bird sniffed the air. A faint sweetish odor became apparent and he reached for his gas mask. Slowly his hands drooped and Carnes grasped him and drew the mask over his face. Dr. Bird rallied slightly and feebly drew a bottle from his pocket and sniffed it. In another instant he was shouldering Carnes aside and staring through the spectroscope. Carnes watched him for an instant and then low whirring noise attracted his attention and he looked up. Silently he caught the Doctor's arm in a viselike grip and pointed.

Hovering above the cabin was a silvery globe, faintly luminous in the moonlight. From its top rose a faint cloud of vapor which circled around the globe and descended toward the earth. The globe hovered like a giant humming bird above the cabin and Carnes barely stifled an exclamation. The door of the cabin opened and Major Trowbridge, walking stiffly and like a man in a dream, appeared. Slowly he advanced for ten yards and stood motionless. The globe moved over him and the bottom unfolded like a lily. Two long arms shot silently down and grasped the motionless figure and drew him up into the heart of the globe. The petals refolded, and silently as a dream the globe shot upward and disappeared.

"Gad! They lost no time!" commented Dr. Bird. "Come on, Carnes, run for your life, or rather, for Trowbridge's life. No, you idiot, leave your gas mask on. I'll take the spectroscope; it'll be all we need."

Followed by the panting Carnes, Dr. Bird sped through the night along an almost invisible path. For half a mile he kept up a headlong pace until Carnes could feel his heart pounding as though it would burst his ribs. The pair debouched from the trees into a glade a few acres in extent and Dr. Bird paused and whistled softly. An answering whistle came from a few yards away and a figure rose in the darkness as they approached.

"Maynard?" called Dr. Bird. "Good enough! I was afraid that you might not have kept your gas mask on."

"My orders were to keep it on, sir," replied the lieutenant in muffled tones through his mask, "but my mechanician did not obey orders. He passed out cold without any warning about fifteen minutes ago."

"Where's your ship?"

"Right over here, sir."

"We'll take off at once. Your craft is equipped with a Bird silencer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come on, Carnes, we're going to follow that globe. Take the front cockpit alone, Maynard; Carnes and I will get in the rear pit with the spec and guide you. You can take of your gas mask at an elevation of a thousand feet. You have pack 'chutes, haven't you?"

"In the rear pit, Doctor."

"Put one on, Carnes, and climb in. I've got to get this spec set up before he gets too high."

The Douglass equipped with the Bird silencer, took the air noiselessly and rapidly gained elevation under the urging of the pilot. Dr. Bird clamped the gas-detecting spectroscope on the front of his cockpit and peered through it.

"Southwest, at about a thousand more elevation," he directed.

"Right!" replied the pilot as he turned the nose of his plane in the indicated direction and began to climb. For an hour and a half the plane flew noiselessly through the night.

"Bald Mountain," said the pilot, pointing. "The Canadian Border is only a few miles away."

"If they've crossed the Border, we're sunk," replied the doctor. "The trail leads straight ahead."

For a few minutes they continued their flight toward the Canadian Border and then Dr. Bird spoke.

"Swing south," he directed, "and drop a thousand feet and come back."

The pilot executed the maneuver and Dr. Bird peered over the edge of the plane and directed the spectroscope toward the ground.

"Half a mile east," he said, "and drop another thousand. Carnes, get ready to jump when I give the word."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Carnes as he fumbled for the rip cord of his parachute, "suppose this thing doesn't open?"

"They'll slide you between two barn doors for a coffin and bury you that way," said Dr. Bird grimly. "You
know your orders, Maynard?"

"Yes, sir. When you drop, I am to land at the nearest town--it will be Lowell--and get in touch with the Commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard if possible. If I get him, I am to tell him my location and wait for the arrival of reenforcements. If I fail to get him on the telephone, I am to deliver a sealed packet which I carry to the nearest United States Marshal. When reenforcements arrive, either from the Navy Yard or from the Marshal, I am to guide them toward the spot where I dropped you and remain, as nearly as I can judge, two miles away until I get a further signal or orders from you."

"That is right. We'll be over the edge in another minute. Are you ready, Carnes?"

"Oh, yes, I'm ready, Doctor, if I have to risk my precious life in this contraption."

"Then jump!"

* * * * *

Side by side, Carnes and the doctor dropped toward the ground. The Douglass flew silently away into the night. Carnes found that the sensation of falling was not an unpleasant one as soon as he got accustomed to it. There was little sensation of motion, and it was not until a sharp whisper from Dr. Bird called it to his attention that he realized that he was almost to the ground. He bent his legs as he had been instructed and landed without any great jar. As he rose he saw that Dr. Bird was already on his feet and was eagerly searching the ground with the spectroscope which he had brought with him in the jump.

"Fold your parachute, Carnes, and we'll stow them away under a rock where they can't be seen. We won't use them again."

Carnes did so and deposited the silk bundle beside the doctor's, and they covered them with rocks until they would be invisible from the air.

"Follow me," said the doctor as he strode carefully forward, stopping now and then to take a sight with the spectroscope. Carnes followed him as he made his way up a small hill which blocked the way. A hiss from Dr. Bird stopped him.

Dr. Bird had dropped flat on the ground, and Carnes, on all fours, crawled forward to join him. He smothered an exclamation as he looked over the crest of the hill. Before him, sitting in a hollow in the ground, was the huge globe which had spirited away Major Trowbridge.

"This is evidently their landing place," whispered Dr. Bird. "The next thing to find is their hiding place."

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He rose and started forward but sank at once to the ground and dragged Carnes down with him. On the hill which formed the opposite side of the hollow a line of light showed for an instant as though a door had been opened. The light disappeared and then reappeared, and as they watched it widened and against an illuminated background four men appeared, carrying a fifth. The door shut behind them and they made their way slowly toward the waiting globe. They laid down their burden and one of them turned a flash-light on the globe and opened a door in its side through which they hoisted their burden. They all entered the globe, the door closed and with a slight whirring sound it rose in the air and moved rapidly toward the northeast.

"That's the place we're looking for," muttered Dr. Bird. "We'll go around this hollow and look for it. Be careful where you step; they must have ventilation somewhere if their laboratory is underground."

Followed by the secret service operative, the doctor made his way along the edge of the hollow. They did not dare to show a light and it was slow work feeling their way forward, inch by inch. When they had reached a point above where the doctor thought the light had been he paused.

"There must be a ventilation shaft somewhere around here," he whispered, his mouth not an inch from Carnes' ear, "and we've got to find it. It would never do to try the door; if any of them are still here it is sure to be guarded. You go up the hill for five yards and I'll go down. Quarter back and forth on a two hundred yard front and work carefully. Don't fall in, whatever you do. We'll return to this point every time we pass it and report."

The operative nodded and walked a few yards up the hill and made his way slowly forward. He went a hundred yards as nearly as he could judge and then stepped five yards further up the hill and made his way back. As he passed the starting point he approached and Dr. Bird's figure rose up.

"Any luck?" he whispered.

Dr. Bird shook his head.

"Well try further," he said. "I think it is probably beyond us, so suppose you go fifteen yards up and quarter the same as before."

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Carnes nodded and stole silently away. Fifteen yards up the hill he went and then paused. He stood on the crest of the hill and before him was a steep, almost precipitous slope. He made his way along the edge for a few yards and then paused. Faintly he could detect a murmur of voices. Inch by inch he crept forward, going over the ground under
foot. He paused and listened intently and decided that the sound must come from the slope beneath him. A glance at his watch told him that he had spent ten minutes on this trip and he made his way back to the meeting place.

Dr. Bird was waiting for him, and in a low whisper Carnes reported his discovery. The doctor went back with him and together they renewed the search. The slope of the hill was almost sheer and Carnes looked dubiously over the edge.

"I wish we had brought the parachutes," he whispered to the doctor. "We could have taken the ropes off them and you could have lowered me over the edge."

Dr. Bird chuckled softly and tugged at his middle. Carnes watched him with astonishment in the dim light, but he understood when Dr. Bird thrust the end of a strong but light silk cord into his hands. He looped it under his arms and the doctor with whispered instructions, lowered him over the cliff. The doctor lowered him for a few feet and then stopped in response to a jerk on the free end. A moment later Carnes signaled to be drawn up and soon stood beside the doctor.

"That's the place all right," he whispered. "The whole cliff is covered with creepers and there is a tree growing right close to it. If we can anchor the cord here, I think that we can slide down to a safe hold on the tree."

A tree stood near and the silk cord was soon fastened. Carnes disappeared over the cliff and in a few moments Dr. Bird slid down the cord to join him. He found the detective seated in the crotch of a tree only a few feet from the face of the cliff. From the cliff came a pronounced murmur of voices. Dr. Bird drew in his breath in excitement and moved forward along the branch. He touched the stone and after a moment of searching he cautiously raised one corner of a painted canvas flap and peered into the cliff. He watched for a few seconds and then slid back and silently pulled Carnes toward him.

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Together the two men made their way toward the cliff and Dr. Bird raised the corner of the flap and they peered into the hill. Before them was a cave fitted up as a cross between a laboratory and a hospital. Almost directly opposite them and at the left of a door in the farther wall was a ray machine of some sort. It was a puzzle to Carnes, and even Dr. Bird, although he could grasp the principle at a glance, was at a loss to divine its use. From a set of coils attached to a generator was connected a tube of the Crookes tube type with the rays from it gathered and thrown by a parabolic reflector onto the space where a man's head would rest when he was seated in a white metal chair with rubber insulated feet, which stood beneath it. An operating table occupied the other side of the room while a gas cylinder and other common hospital apparatus stood around ready for use.

Seated at a table which occupied the center of the room were three men. The sound of their voices rose from an indistinct murmur to audibility as the flap was raised and the watchers could readily understand their words. Two of them sat with their faces toward the main entrance and the third man faced them. Carnes bit his lip as he looked at the man at the head of the table. He was twisted and misshapen in body, a grotesque dwarf with a hunched back, not over four feet in height. His massive head, sunken between his hunched shoulders, showed a tremendous dome of cranium and a brow wider and even higher than Dr. Bird's. The rest of his face was lined and drawn as though by years of acute suffering. Sharp black eyes glared brightly from deep sunk caverns. The dwarf was entirely bald; even the bushy eyebrows which would be expected from his face, were missing.

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"They ought to be getting back," said the dwarf sharply.
"If they get back at all," said one of the two figures facing him.
"What do you mean?" growled the dwarf, his eyes glittering ominously. "They'll return all right; they know they'd better."

"They'll return if they can, but I tell you again, Slavatsky, I think it was a piece of foolishness to try to take two men in one night. We got Bird all right, but it is getting late for a second one, and they had to take Bird over a hundred miles and then go nearly three hundred more for Williams. The news about Bird may have been discovered and spread and others may be looking out for us. Carnes might have recovered."

"Didn't he get a full dose of lethane?"
"So Frick says, and Bird certainly had a full dose, but I can't help but feel uneasy. Our operations were going too nicely on schedule and you had to break it up and take on an extra case in the same night as a scheduled one. I tell you, I don't like it."

"I'm sorry that I did it, Carson, but only because the results were so poor. We had planned on Williams for a month and I wanted him. And Bird was so easy that I couldn't resist it."

"And what did you get? Not as much menthium as would have come from an ordinary bookkeeper."

"I'll admit that Bird is a grossly overrated man. He must have worked in sheer luck in his work in the past, for there was nothing in his brain to show it above average. We got barely enough menthium to replace what we used in capturing him."
"We ought to have taken Carnes and left Bird alone," snorted Carson. "Even a wooden-headed detective ought to have given us a better supply than Bird yielded."

"We are bound to meet with disappointments once in a while. I had marked Bird down long ago as soon as I could get a chance at him."

"Well, you ran that show, Slavatsky, but I'll warn you that we aren't going to let you pull off another one like it. I take no more crazy chances, even on your orders."

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The hunchback rose to his feet, his eyes glittering ominously.

"What do you mean, Carson?" he asked slowly, his hand slipping behind him as he spoke.

"Don't try any rough stuff, Slavatsky!" warned Carson sharply. "I can pull a tube as fast as you can, and I'll do it if I have to."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" protested the third man rising, "we are all too deep in this to quarrel. Sit down and let's talk this over. Carson is just worried."

"What is there to be worried about?" grunted the dwarf as he slid back into his chair. "Everything has gone nicely so far and no suspicion has been raised."

"Maybe it has and then again maybe it hasn't," growled Carson. "I think this Bird episode to-night looks bad. In the first place, it came too opportunely and too easily. In the second place Bird should have yielded more menthium, and in the third place, did you notice his hands? They weren't the type of hands to expect on a man of his type."

"Nonsense, they were acid stained."

"Acid stains can be put on. It may be all right, but I am worried. While we are talking about this matter, there is another thing I want cleared up."

"What is it?"

"I think, Slavatsky, that you are holding out on us. You are getting more than your share of the menthium."

"Again the dwarf leaped to his feet, but the peace-maker intervened. "Carson has a right to look at the records, Slavatsky," he said. "I am satisfied, but I'd like to look at them, too. None of us have seen them for two months."

The dwarf glared at first one and then the other.

"All right," he said shortly and limped to a cabinet on the wall. He drew a key from his pocket and opened it and pulled out a leather-bound book. "Look all you please. I was supposed to get the most. It was my idea."

"You were to get one share and a half, while Willis, Frink and I got one share each and the rest half a share," said Carson. "I know how much has been given and it won't take me but a minute to check up."

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He bent over the book, but Willis interrupted.

"Better put it away, Carson," he said, "here come the rest and we don't want them to know we suspect anything."

He pointed toward a disc on the wall which had begun to glow. Slavatsky looked at it and grasped the book from Carson and replaced it in the cabinet. He moved over and started the generator and the tube began to glow with a violet light. A noise came from the outside and the door opened. Four men entered carrying a fifth whom they propped up in the chair under the glowing tube.

"Did everything go all right?" asked the dwarf eagerly.

"Smooth as silk," replied one of the four. "I hope we get some results this time."

The dwarf bent over the ray apparatus and made some adjustments and the head of the unconscious man was bathed with a violet glow. For three minutes the flood of light poured on his head and then the dwarf shut off the light and Carson and Willis lifted the figure and laid it on the operating table. The dwarf bent over the man and inserted the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the back of the neck at the base of the brain. The needle was an extremely long one, and Dr. Bird gasped as he saw four inches of shining steel buried in the brain of the unconscious man.

Slowly Slavatsky drew back the plunger of the syringe and Dr. Bird could see it was being filled with an amber fluid. For two minutes the slow work continued, until a speck of red appeared in the glass syringe barrel.

"Seven and a half cubic centimeters!" cried the dwarf in a tone of delight.

"Fine!" cried Carson. "That's a record, isn't it?"

"No, we got eight once. Now hold him carefully while I return some of it."

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Slavatsky slowly pressed home the plunger and a portion of the amber fluid was returned to the patient's skull. Presently he withdrew the needle and straightened up and held it toward the light.

"Six centimeters net," he announced. "Take him back, Frink. I'll give Carson and Willis their share now and
we'll take care of the rest of you when you return. Is the ship well stocked?"

"Enough for two or three more trips."

"In that case, I'll inject this whole lot. Better get going, Frink, it's pretty late."

The four men who had brought the patient in stepped forward and lifted him from the table and bore him out. Dr. Bird dropped the canvas screen and strained his ears. A faint whir told him that the globe had taken to the air. He slid back along the limb of the tree until he touched the rope and silently climbed hand over hand until he gained the crest. He bent his back to the task of raising Carnes, and the operative soon stood beside him on the ledge surmounting the cliff.

"What on earth were they doing?" asked Carnes in a whisper.

"That was Professor Williams of Yale. They were depriving him of his memory. There will be another amnesia case in the papers to-morrow. I haven't time to explain their methods now: we've got to act. You have a flash-light?"

"Yes, and my gun. Shall we break in? There are only three of them, and I think we could handle the lot."

"Yes, but the others may return at any time and we want to bag the whole lot. They've done their damage for to-night. You heard my orders to Lieutenant Maynard, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He should be somewhere in these hills to the south with assistance of some sort. The signal to them is three long flashes followed in turn by three short ones and three more long. Go and find them and bring them here. When you get close give me the same light signal and don't try to break in unless I am with you. I am going to reconnoitre a little more and make sure that there is no back entrance through which they can escape. Good luck. Carnes: hurry all you can. There is no time to be lost."

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The secret service operative stole away into the night and Dr. Bird climbed back down the rope and took his place at the window. Willis lay on the operating table unconscious, while Slavatsky and Carson studied the now partially emptied syringe.

"You gave him his full share all right," Carson was saying. "I guess you are playing square with us. I'll take mine now."

He lay down on the operating table and the dwarf fitted an anesthesia cone over his face and opened the valve of the gas cylinder. In a moment he closed it and rolled the unconscious man on his face and deftly inserted the long needle. Instead of injecting a portion of the contents of the syringe as Dr. Bird had expected to do, he drew back on the plunger for a minute and then took out the needle and held the syringe to the light.

"Well, Mr. Carson," he said with a malignant glance at the unconscious figure, "that recovers the dose you got a couple of weeks ago while Willis watched me. I don't think you really need any menthium; your brain is too active to suit me as it is."

He gave an evil chuckle and walked to the far side of the cave and opened a secret panel. He drew from a recess a flask and carefully emptied a portion of the contents of the syringe into it. He replaced the flask and closed the panel, and with another chuckle he limped over to a chair and threw himself down in it. For an hour he sat motionless and Dr. Bird carefully worked his way back along the branch and climbed the rope and started for the hollow.

A faint whirring noise attracted his attention, and he could see the faintly luminous globe in the distance, rapidly approaching. It came to a stop at the spot where it had previously landed and four men got out. Instead of going toward the cave, they towed the globe, which floated a few inches from the earth, toward the side of the hill farthest from where the doctor stood. Three of them held it, while the fourth went forward and bent over some controls on the ground. A creaking sound came through the night and the men moved forward with the globe. Presently its movement stopped and men reappeared. Again came the creaking sound and the glow faded out as though a screen had been drawn in front of it. The four men walked toward the door of the cave.

Dr. Bird dropped flat on the ground and saw them pause a few yards below him on the hill and again work some hidden controls. A glare of light showed for an instant and they disappeared and everything was again quiet. Dr. Bird debated the advisability of returning to the window but decided against it and moved down the face of the hill.

Inch by inch he went over the ground, but found nothing. In the darkness he could not locate the door and he made his way around to the back of the hill. The precipice loomed above him and he swept it with his gaze, but he could locate no opening in the darkness and he dared not use a flash-light. As he turned he faced the east and noted with a start of surprise that the sky was getting red. He glanced at his watch and found that Carnes had been gone for nearly three hours.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Time has gone faster than I realized. He ought to be back at any time
He mounted the highest point of the hill and sent three long flashes, followed in turn by three short and three more long to the south and watched eagerly for an answer. He waited five minutes and repeated the signal, but no answering flashes came from the empty hills. With a grunt which might have meant anything, he turned and made his way toward the opposite side of the hollow where the globe had disappeared. Here he met with more luck. He had marked the location with extreme care and he had not spent over twenty minutes feeling over the ground before his hand encountered a bit of metal. As he pulled on it his eyes sought the side of the hill.

The dawn had grown sufficiently bright for him to see the result of his action. A portion of the hill folded back and the faintly glowing ship became visible. With a muttered exclamation of triumph he approached it. The globe was about nine feet in diameter and was without visible doors or windows. Around and around it the doctor went, searching for an entrance. The ship now rested solidly on the ground. He failed to find what he sought and his sensitive hands began to go over it searching for an irregularity. He had covered nearly half of it before his finger found a hidden button and pressed it. Silently a door in the side of the craft opened and he advanced to enter.

"Keep them up!" said a sharp voice behind him.
Dr. Bird froze into instant immobility and the voice spoke again.
"Turn around!"
Dr. Bird turned and looked full into the eye of a revolver held by the man the dwarf had addressed as Frink. Behind Frink stood the dwarf and three other men.

As his eye fell on Dr. Bird, Frink turned momentarily pale and staggered back, the revolver wavering as he did so. Dr. Bird made a lightning-like grab for his own weapon, but before he could draw it Frink had recovered and the revolver was again steady.
"Dr. Bird!" gasped Slavatsky. "Impossible!"
"Get his gun, Harris," said Frink.

One of the men stepped forward and dextrously removed the doctor's automatic and frisked him expertly to insure himself that he had no other weapon concealed.

"Bring him to the cave," directed Slavatsky, who, though obviously still shaken, had just as obviously recovered enough to be a very dangerous man. Two of the men grasped the doctor and led him along toward the entrance to the laboratory cave which stood wide open in the gathering daylight. Frink paused long enough to shut the side of the hill and conceal the ship, and then followed the doctor. In the cave the door was shut and the doctor placed against the wall under the window through which he had peered earlier in the night. Slavatsky took his seat at the table, his malignant black eyes boring into the Doctor. Carson and Willis sat on the edge of the operating table, evidently still partially under the effects of the anesthetic that had been administered to them.

"How did you get back here?" demanded Slavatsky.
"Find out!" snapped Dr. Bird.

The dwarf rose threateningly.
"Speak respectfully to me; I am the Master of the World!" he roared in an angry voice. "Answer my questions when I speak, or means will be found to make you answer. How did you get back here?"

Dr. Bird maintained a stubborn silence, his fierce eyes answering the dwarf's, look for look, and his prominent chin jutting out a little more squarely. Carson suddenly broke the silence.
"That's not the Bird we had here earlier," he cried as he staggered to his feet.
"What do you mean?" demanded Slavatsky whirling on him.
"Look at his hands!" replied Carson pointing.

Slavatsky looked at Dr. Bird's long mobile fingers and an evil leer came over his countenance.
"So, Dr. Bird," he said slowly, "you thought to match wits with Ivan Slavatsky, the greatest mind of all the ages. For a time you fooled me when your double was operated on here, but not for long. I presume you thought that we had no way of detecting the substitution? You have discovered differently. Where is your friend, Mr. Carnes?"

"Didn't your men leave him in the cabin when you kidnapped me?"

Slavatsky looked at Frink inquiringly.
"He stayed in the cabin if he was in it when we got there," the leader of the kidnapping gang replied. "He got a full shot of lethane and he's due to be asleep yet. I don't know how this man recovered. I left him there myself."
"Fool!" shrieked Slavatsky. "You brought me a double, a dummy whom I wasted my time in operating on. Was the other a dummy, too?"
"I didn't enter the cabin."
Slavatsky shrugged his shoulders.  
"If that is all the good the menthium I have injected has done you, I might as well have saved it. It doesn't matter, however: we have the one we wanted. Dr. Bird, it was very thoughtful of you to come here and offer your marvelous brain to strengthen mine. I have no doubt that you will yield even more menthium than Professor Williams did this evening especially as I will extract your entire supply and reduce you to permanent idiocy. I will have no mercy on you as I have on the others I have operated on."

Dr. Bird blanched in spite of himself at the ominous words.
"You have the whip-hand for the moment, Slavatsky, but my time may come--and if it does, I will remember your kindness. I saw your operation on Professor Williams this evening and know your power. I also know that you stole the idea and the method from Sweigert of Vienna. I saw you inject the fluid you drew into Willis' brain. Shall I tell what else I saw?"
It was the dwarf's turn to blanch, but he recovered himself quickly.
"Into the chair with him!" he roared.

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Three of the men grasped the doctor and forced him into the chair and Slavatsky started the generator. The violet light bathed Dr. Bird's head and he felt a stiffness and contraction of his neck muscles, and as he tried to shout out his knowledge of Slavatsky's treachery, he found that his vocal chords were paralyzed. Through a gathering haze he could see Carson approaching with an anesthesia cone and the sweet smell of lethane assailed his nostrils. He fought with all his force, but strong hands held him, and he felt himself slipping--slipping--slipping--and then falling into an immense void. His head slumped forward on his chest and Slavatsky shut off the generator.
"On the table," he said briefly.
Four men picked up the herculean frame of the unconscious doctor and hoisted him up on the table. Carson seized his head and bent it forward and the dwarf took from a case a syringe with a five-inch needle. He touched the point of it to the base of the doctor's brain.
"Slavatsky! Look!" cried Frink.
With an exclamation of impatience the dwarf turned and stared at a disc set on the wall of the cave. It was glowing brightly. With an oath he dropped the syringe and snapped a switch, plunging the cave into darkness. A tiny panel in the door opened to his touch and he stared out into the light.
"Soldiers!" he gasped. "Quick, the back way!"
As he spoke there came a sound as of a heavy body falling at the back of the cave. Slavatsky turned the switch and flooded the cave with light. At the back of the cave stood Operative Carnes, an automatic pistol in his hand.
"Open the main door!" Carnes snapped.

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Slavatsky made a move toward the light, and Carnes' gun roared deafeningly in the confined space. The heavy bullet smashed into the wall an inch from the dwarf's hand and he started back.
"Open the main door!" ordered Carnes again.
The men stared at one another for a moment and the dwarf's eyes fell.
"Open the door, Frink," he said.
Frink moved over to a lever. He glanced at Slavatsky and a momentary gleam of intelligence passed between them. Frink raised his hand toward the lever and Carnes gun roared again and Frink's arm fell limp from a smashed shoulder.
"Slavatsky," said Carnes sternly, "come here!"
Slowly the dwarf approached.
"Turn around!" said Carnes.
He turned and felt the cold muzzle of Carnes' gun against the back of his neck.
"Now tell one of your men to open the door," said the detective. "If he promptly obeys your order, you are safe. If he doesn't, you die."
Slavatsky hesitated for a moment, but the cold muzzle of the automatic bored into the back of his neck and when he spoke it was in a quavering whine.
"Open the door, Carson," he whimpered.
There was moment of pause.
"If that door isn't open by the time I count three," said Carnes, "--as far as Slavatsky is concerned, it's just too bad. I'll have four shots left--and I'm a dead shot at this range. One! Two!"
His lips framed the word "three" and his fingers were tightening on the trigger when Carson jumped forward with an oath. He pulled a lever on the wall and the door swung open. Carnes shouted and through the opened door came a half dozen marines followed by an officer.
"Tie these men up!" snapped Carnes.

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In a trice the six men were securely bound and Frink's bleeding shoulder was being skilfully treated by two of the marines. Carnes turned his attention to the unconscious doctor.

He rolled him over on his back and began to chafe his hands. An officer in a naval uniform came through the door and with a swift glance around, bent over Dr. Bird. He raised one of the doctor's eyelids and peered closely at his eye and then sniffed at his breath.

"It's some anesthetic I don't know," he said. "I'll try a stimulant."

He reached in his pocket for a hypodermic, but Carnes interrupted him.

"Earlier in the evening Dr. Bird said they were using lethane," he said.

"Oh, that new gas the Chemical Warfare Service has discovered," said the surgeon. "In that case I guess it'll just have to wear off. I know of nothing that will neutralize it."

Without replying, Carnes began to feverishly search the pockets of the unconscious scientist. With an exclamation of triumph he drew out a bottle and uncorked it. A strong smell as of garlic penetrated the room and he held the opened bottle under Dr. Bird's nose. The doctor lay for a moment without movement, and then he coughed and sat up half strangled with tears running down his face.

"Take that confounded bottle away, Carnes!" he said. "Do you want to strangle me?"

He sat up and looked around.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Oh, yes, I remember now. That brute was about to operate on me. How did you get here?"

"Never mind that, Doctor. Are you all right?"

"Right as a trivet, old dear. How did you get here so opportunely?"

"I was a little slow in locating Lieutenant Maynard and the marines. When we got here I was afraid that we couldn't find the door, so I took Maynard and a detail around to the back and I went up to the top and slid down our cord and looked in the window. You were unconscious and Slavatsky was bending over you with a needle in his hand. I was about to try a shot at him when something called their attention to the men in front and I squeezed through the window and dropped in on them. They didn't seem any too glad to see me, but I overlooked that and insisted on inviting the rest of my friends in to share in the party. That's all."

"Carnes," said the Doctor, "you're probably lying like a trooper when you make out that you did nothing, but I'll pry the truth out of you sooner or later. Now I've got to get to work. Send for Lieutenant Maynard."

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One of the marines went out to get the flyer, and Dr. Bird stepped to the cabinet from which Slavatsky had taken his record book earlier in the evening and took out the leather-bound volume. He opened it and had started to read when Lieutenant Maynard entered the cave.

"Hello, Maynard," said the Doctor, looking up. "Are the rest of the party on their way?"

"They will be here in less than two hours, Doctor."

"Good enough! Have some one sent to guide them here. In the meanwhile, I'm going to study these records. Keep the prisoners quiet. If they make a noise, gag them. I want to concentrate."

For an hour and a half silence reigned in the cave. A stir was heard outside and Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, entered leading a stout gray-haired man. Dr. Bird whistled when he saw them and leaped to his feet as another figure followed the admiral.

"The President!" gasped Carnes as the officers came to a salute and the marines presented arms.

The President nodded to his ex-guard, acknowledged the salute of the rest and turned to Dr. Bird.

"Have you met with success, Doctor?" he asked.

"I have, Mr. President; or, rather, I hope that I have. At the same time, I would rather experiment on some other victim of their devilry than the one you have brought in."

"My decision that the one I have brought shall be the first to be experimented on, as you term it, is unalterable."

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Dr. Bird bowed and turned to the dwarf who had been a sullen witness of what had gone on.

"Slavatsky," he said slowly, "your game is up. I have witnessed one of your brain transfusions and I know the method. I gather from your notes that the menthium you have hidden in that cabinet is still as potent as when it was first extracted from a living brain, but in this case I am going to draw it fresh from one of your gang. Some of the details of the operation are a little hazy to me, but those you will teach me. I am going to restore this man to the condition he was in before you did your devil's work on him and you will direct my movements. Just what is the first step in removing the menthium from a brain?"

The dwarf maintained a stubborn silence.
"You refuse to answer?" asked the Doctor in feigned surprise. "I thought that you would rather instruct me and have me try the operation first on other men. Since you prefer that I operate on you first, I will be glad to do so."

He stepped to the opposite wall and in a few moments had opened the dwarf's hiding place and taken out the flask of menthium.

"Carson," he said, "after you had watched Slavatsky inject menthium into Willis, you took lethane and expected him to inject menthium into your brain. Instead of doing so he withdrew a portion from your brain and put it in this flask. I have reason to believe from his secret records which I found in the cabinet with this flask that he has done so regularly. Are you willing to instruct me while I remove the menthium from him?"

"The dirty swine!" shouted Carson. "I'll do anything to get even with him, but I have never performed the operation. Only Slavatsky and Willis have operated."

"Will you help me, Willis?" asked Dr. Bird.

"I'll be glad to, Doctor. I am sick of this business anyway. At first, Slavatsky just planned to give us abnormally keen brains, but lately he has been talking of setting himself up as Emperor of the World, and I am sick of it. I think I would have broken with him and told all I know, soon, anyway."

"Throw him in that chair," said Dr. Bird.

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Despite the howlings and strugglings of the dwarf, three of the marines strapped him in the chair beneath the tube. The dwarf howled and frothed at the mouth and directed a final appeal for mercy to the President.

"Spare me, Your Excellency," he howled. "I will put my brains at your service and make you the greatest mentality of all time. Together we can conquer and rule the world. I will show you how to build hundreds of ships like mine--"

The President turned his back on the dwarf and spoke curtly.

"Proceed with your experiments, Dr. Bird," he said.

Slavatsky directed his appeals to the doctor, who peremptorily silenced him.

"I told you a few hours ago, Slavatsky, that the time might come when I would remember your threats against me. I will show you the same mercy now as you promised me then. Carnes, put a cone over his face." Despite the howls of the dwarf, the operative forced an anesthesia cone over his face and Dr. Bird turned to the valve of the lethane cylinder. With Willis directing his movements, he turned on the ray for three minutes and removed the unconscious dwarf to the operating table. He took the long-needled syringe from a case and sterilized it and then turned to the President.

"I am about to operate," he said, "but before I do so, I wish to explain to all just what I have learned and what I am about to do. With that data, the decision of whether I shall proceed will rest with you and Admiral Clay. Have I your permission to do so?"

* * * * *

The President nodded.

"When I first read of these amnesia cases, I took them for coincidences--until you consulted me and gave me an opportunity to examine one of the victims. I found a small puncture at the base of the brain which I could not explain, and I began to dig into old records. I knew, of course, of Sweigert of Vienna, and the extravagant claims he had put forward in 1911. He was far ahead of his time, but he mixed up some profound scientific discoveries with mysticism and occultism until he was discredited. Nevertheless, he continued his experiments with the aid of his principal assistant, a man named Slavatsky.

"Sweigert's theory was that intellectuality, brain power, intelligence, call it what you will, was the result of the presence of a fluid which he called 'menthium' in the brain. He thought that it could be transferred from one person to another, and with the aid of Slavatsky, he experimented on himself. He removed the menthium from an unfortunate victim, who was reduced to a state of imbecility, and Slavatsky injected the substance into Sweigert's brain. The experiment resulted fatally and Slavatsky was tried for murder. He was acquitted of intentional murder but was imprisoned for a time for manslaughter. He was released when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up, and for a time I lost track of him.

"I found translations of both the records of the trials and of Sweigert's original reports, and the thing that attracted my attention was that the puncture I found in the victim corresponded exactly with the puncture described by Sweigert as the one he made in extracting the menthium. I asked the immigration authorities to check over their records and they found that a man named Slavatsky whose description corresponded with the ill-fated Sweigert's assistant had entered the United States under Austria's quota about a year ago. The chain of evidence seemed complete to me, and it only remained to find the man who was systematically robbing brains.

"If such a thing was really going on, I felt that my reputation would make me an attractive bait and I secured a double, as you know, and placed him in a position where his kidnapping would be an easy matter. I was sure that the
victims were being taken away by air and that lethane was being used to reduce the neighborhood to a state of profound somnolence, so I hid myself near my double with a gas detector which would find even minute traces of lethane in the air.

"My fish rose to the lure and came after the bait last night. When his ship arrived, I found a strange gas in the air, and followed the ship by the trail of the substance which it left behind it. Carnes was with me, and we got here in time to witness the extraction of the menthium from my friend, Professor Williams of Yale, and to see it injected into one of Slavatsky's gang. I sent Carnes for help and messed around until I was captured myself--and help arrived just in time. That's about all there is to tell. I am now about to reverse the process and try to remove the stolen brains from the criminals and restore them to their rightful owners. I have never operated and the result may be fatal. Shall I proceed?"

The President and Admiral Clay consulted for a moment in undertones.

"Go on with your experiments, Dr. Bird," said the President, "and we will hold you blameless for a failure. You have worked so many miracles in the past that we have every confidence in you."

Dr. Bird bowed acknowledgment to the compliment and bent over the unconscious dwarf. With Willis directing every move, he inserted the needle and drew back slowly on the plunger. Twenty-three and one-half cubic centimeters of amber fluid flowed into the syringe before a speck of blood appeared.

"Enough!" cried Willis. Dr. Bird withdrew the syringe and motioned to Admiral Clay. The man the Admiral had brought in was placed in the chair and lethane administered. He was laid on the table, and, with a silent prayer, Dr. Bird inserted the needle and pressed the plunger. When five and one-quarter centimeters had flowed into the man's brains, he withdrew the needle and held the bottle which Carnes had used to revive him under the man's nose. The patient coughed a moment and sat up.

"Where am I?" he demanded. His gaze roved the cave and fell on the President. "Hello, Robert," he exclaimed.

"What happened?"

With a cry of joy the President sprang forward and wrung the hand of the man.

"Are you all right, William?" he asked anxiously. "Do you feel perfectly normal?"

"Of course I do. My neck feels a little stiff. What are you talking about? Why shouldn't I feel normal? How did I get here?"

"Take him outside, Admiral, and explain to him," said the President.

Admiral Clay led the puzzled man outside and the President turned to Dr. Bird.

"Doctor," he said, "I need not tell you that I again add my personal gratitude to the gratitude of a nation which would be yours, could the miracles you work be told off. If there is ever any way that can serve you, either personally or officially, do not hesitate to ask. The other victims will be brought here to-day. Will you be able to restore them?"

"I will, Mr. President. From Slavatsky's records I find that I will have enough if I reduce all of his men to a state of imbecility except Willis. In view of his assistance, I propose to leave him with enough menthium to give him the intelligence of an ordinary schoolboy."

"I quite approve of that," said the President as Willis humbly expressed his gratitude. "Have you had time to make an examination of that ship of Slavatsky's, yet?"

"I have not. As soon as the work of restoration is completed, I will go over it, and when I master the principles I will be glad to take them up with the Army-Navy General Board."

"Thank you, Doctor," said the President. He shook hands heartily and left the cave. Carnes turned and looked at the Doctor.

"Will you answer a question, Doctor?" he asked. "Ever since this case started, I have been wondering at your extraordinary powers. You have ordered the army, the navy, the department of justice and everyone else around as though you were an absolute monarch. I know the President was behind you, but what puzzles me is how he came to be so vitally interested in the case."

Dr. Bird smiled quizically at the detective.

"Even the secret service doesn't know everything," he said. "Evidently you didn't recognize the man whose memory I restored. Besides being one of the most brilliant corporation executives in the country, he has another unique distinction. He happens to be the only brother of the President of the United States."
THE HOOFER
by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

A space rover has no business with a family. But what can a man in the full vigor of youth do—if his heart cries out for a home?

They all knew he was a spacer because of the white goggle marks on his sun-scorched face, and so they tolerated him and helped him. They even made allowances for him when he staggered and fell in the aisle of the bus while pursuing the harassed little housewife from seat to seat and cajoling her to sit and talk with him.

Having fallen, he decided to sleep in the aisle. Two men helped him to the back of the bus, dumped him on the rear seat, and tucked his gin bottle safely out of sight. After all, he had not seen Earth for nine months, and judging by the crusted matter about his eyelids, he couldn't have seen it too well now, even if he had been sober. Glare-blindness, gravity-legs, and agoraphobia were excuses for a lot of things, when a man was just back from Big Bottomless. And who could blame a man for acting strangely?

Minutes later, he was back up the aisle and swaying giddily over the little housewife. "How!" he said. "Me Chief Broken Wing. You wanta Indian wrestle?"

The girl, who sat nervously staring at him, smiled wanly, and shook her head.

"Quiet li'l pigeon, aren't'cha?" he burbled affectionately, crashing into the seat beside her.

The two men slid out of their seats, and a hand clamped his shoulder. "Come on, Broken Wing, let's go back to bed."

"My name's Hogey," he said. "Big Hogey Parker. I was just kidding about being a Indian."

"Yeah. Come on, let's go have a drink." They got him on his feet, and led him stumbling back down the aisle.

"My ma was half Cherokee, see? That's how come I said it. You wanta hear a war whoop? Real stuff."

"Never mind."

He cupped his hands to his mouth and favored them with a blood-curdling proof of his ancestry, while the female passengers stirred restlessly and hunched in their seats. The driver stopped the bus and went back to warn him against any further display. The driver flashed a deputy's badge and threatened to turn him over to a constable.


"Will you just sit still and be quiet then, eh?"

Big Hogey nodded emphatically. "Shorry, officer, I didn't mean to make any trouble."

When the bus started again, he fell on his side and lay still. He made retching sounds for a time, then rested, snoring softly. The bus driver woke him again at Caine's junction, retrieved his gin bottle from behind the seat, and helped him down the aisle and out of the bus.

Big Hogey stumbled about for a moment, then sat down hard in the gravel at the shoulder of the road. The driver paused with one foot on the step, looking around. There was not even a store at the road junction, but only a freight building next to the railroad track, a couple of farmhouses at the edge of a side-road, and, just across the way, a deserted filling station with a sagging roof. The land was Great Plains country, treeless, barren, and rolling.

Big Hogey got up and staggered around in front of the bus, clutching at it for support, losing his duffle bag.

"Hey, watch the traffic!" The driver warned. With a surge of unwelcome compassion he trotted around after his troublesome passenger, taking his arm as he sagged again. "You crossing?"

"Yah," Hogey muttered. "Lemme alone, I'm okay."

The driver started across the highway with him. The traffic was sparse, but fast and dangerous in the central ninety-mile lane.

"I'm okay," Hogey kept protesting. "I'm a tumbler, ya know? Gravity's got me. Damn gravity. I'm not used to gravity, ya know? I used to be a tumbler--huk!--only now I gotta be a hoofer. 'Count of li'l Hogey. You know about li'l Hogey?"

"Yeah. Your son. Come on."

"Say, you gotta son? I bet you gotta son."

"Two kids," said the driver, catching Hogey's bag as it slipped from his shoulder. "Both girls."

"Say, you oughta be home with them kids. Man oughta stick with his family. You oughta get another job."

Hogey eyed him owlishly, waggled a moralistic finger, skidded on the gravel as they stepped onto the opposite shoulder, and sprawled again.
The driver blew a weary breath, looked down at him, and shook his head. Maybe it'd be kinder to find a constable after all. This guy could get himself killed, wandering around loose.

"Somebody supposed to meet you?" he asked, squinting around at the dusty hills.

"Huk!--who, me?" Hogey giggled, belched, and shook his head. "Nope. Nobody knows I'm coming. 'Sprise. I'm supposed to be here a week ago." He looked up at the driver with a pained expression. "Week late, ya know? Marie's gonna be sore--woo-hoo!--is she gonna be sore!" He waggled his head severely at the ground.

"Which way are you going?" the driver grunted impatiently.

Hogey pointed down the side-road that led back into the hills. "Marie's pop's place. You know where? 'Bout three miles from here. Gotta walk, I guess."

"Don't," the driver warned. "You sit there by the culvert till you get a ride. Okay?"

Hogey nodded forlornly.

"Now stay out of the road," the driver warned, then hurried back across the highway. Moments later, the atomic battery-driven motors droned mournfully, and the bus pulled away.

Big Hogey blinked after it, rubbing the back of his neck. "Nice people," he said. "Nice buncha people. All hoofers."

With a grunt and a lurch, he got to his feet, but his legs wouldn't work right. With his tumbler's reflexes, he fought to right himself with frantic arm motions, but gravity claimed him, and he went stumbling into the ditch.

"Damn legs, damn crazy legs!" he cried.

The bottom of the ditch was wet, and he crawled up the embankment with mud-soaked knees, and sat on the shoulder again. The gin bottle was still intact. He had himself a long fiery drink, and it warmed him deep down. He blinked around at the gaunt and treeless land.

The sun was almost down, forge-red on a dusty horizon. The blood-streaked sky faded into sulphurous yellow toward the zenith, and the very air that hung over the land seemed full of yellow smoke, the omnipresent dust of the plains.

A farm truck turned onto the side-road and moaned away, its driver hardly glancing at the dark young man who sat swaying on his duffle bag near the culvert. Hogey scarcely noticed the vehicle. He just kept staring at the crazy sun.

He shook his head. It wasn't really the sun. The sun, the real sun, was a hateful eye-sizzling horror in the dead black pit. It painted everything with pure white pain, and you saw things by the reflected pain-light. The fat red sun was strictly a phoney, and it didn't fool him any. He hated it for what he knew it was behind the gory mask, and for what it had done to his eyes.

* * * * *

With a grunt, he got to his feet, managed to shoulder the duffle bag, and started off down the middle of the farm road, lurching from side to side, and keeping his eyes on the rolling distances. Another car turned onto the side-road, honking angrily.

Hogey tried to turn around to look at it, but he forgot to shift his footing. He staggered and went down on the pavement. The car's tires screeched on the hot asphalt. Hogey lay there for a moment, groaning. That one had hurt his hip. A car door slammed and a big man with a florid face got out and stalked toward him, looking angry.

"What the hell's the matter with you, fella?" he drawled. "You soused? Man, you've really got a load."

Hogey got up doggedly, shaking his head to clear it. "Space legs," he prevaricated. "Got space legs. Can't stand the gravity."

The burly farmer retrieved his gin bottle for him, still miraculously unbroken. "Here's your gravity," he grunted. "Listen, fella, you better get home pronto."

"Pronto? Hey, I'm no Mex. Honest, I'm just space burned. You know?"

"Yeah. Say, who are you, anyway? Do you live around here?"

It was obvious that the big man had taken him for a hobo or a tramp. Hogey pulled himself together. "Goin' to the Hauptman's place. Marie. You know Marie?"

The farmer's eyebrows went up. "Marie Hauptman? Sure I know her. Only she's Marie Parker now. Has been, nigh on six years. Say--" He paused, then gaped. "You ain't her husband by any chance?"

"Hogey, that's me. Big Hogey Parker."

"Well, I'll be--! Get in the car. I'm going right past John Hauptman's place. Boy, you're in no shape to walk it."

He grinned wryly, waggled his head, and helped Hogey and his bag into the back seat. A woman with a sun-wrinkled neck sat rigidly beside the farmer in the front, and she neither greeted the passenger nor looked around.

"They don't make cars like this anymore," the farmer called over the growl of the ancient gasoline engine and the grind of gears. "You can have them new atomics with their loads of hot isotopes under the seat. Ain't safe, I say--eh, Martha?"
The woman with the sun-baked neck quivered her head slightly. "A car like this was good enough for Pa, an' I reckon it's good enough for us," she drawled mournfully.

Five minutes later the car drew in to the side of the road. "Reckon you can walk it from here," the farmer said. "That's Hauptman's road just up ahead."

He helped Hogey out of the car and drove away without looking back to see if Hogey stayed on his feet. The woman with the sun-baked neck was suddenly talking garrulously in his direction.

It was twilight. The sun had set, and the yellow sky was turning gray. Hogey was too tired to go on, and his legs would no longer hold him. He blinked around at the land, got his eyes focused, and found what looked like Hauptman's place on a distant hillside. It was a big frame house surrounded by a wheatfield, and a few scrawny trees. Having located it, he stretched out in the tall grass beyond the ditch to take a little rest.

Somewhere dogs were barking, and a cricket sang creaking monotony in the grass. Once there was the distant thunder of a rocket blast from the launching station six miles to the west, but it faded quickly. An A-motored convertible whined past on the road, but Hogey went unseen.

When he awoke, it was night, and he was shivering. His stomach was screeching, and his nerves dancing with high voltages. He sat up and gropped for his watch, then remembered he had pawned it after the poker game. Remembering the game and the results of the game made him wince and bite his lip and grope for the bottle again.

He sat breathing heavily for a moment after the stiff drink. Equating time to position had become second nature with him, but he had to think for a moment because his defective vision prevented him from seeing the Earth-crescent.

Vega was almost straight above him in the late August sky, so he knew it wasn't much after sundown--probably about eight o'clock. He braced himself with another swallow of gin, picked himself up and got back to the road, feeling a little sobered after the nap.

He limped on up the pavement and turned left at the narrow drive that led between barbed-wire fences toward the Hauptman farmhouse, five hundred yards or so from the farm road. The fields on his left belonged to Marie's father, he knew. He was getting close--close to home and woman and child.

He dropped the bag suddenly and leaned against a fence post, rolling his head on his forearms and choking in spasms of air. He was shaking all over, and his belly writhed. He wanted to turn and run. He wanted to crawl out in the grass and hide.

What were they going to say? And Marie, Marie most of all. How was he going to tell her about the money?

Six hitches in space, and every time the promise had been the same: One more tour, baby, and we'll have enough dough, and then I'll quit for good. One more time, and we'll have our stake--enough to open a little business, or buy a house with a mortgage and get a job.

And she had waited, but the money had never been quite enough until this time. This time the tour had lasted nine months, and he had signed on for every run from station to moon-base to pick up the bonuses. And this time he'd made it. Two weeks ago, there had been forty-eight hundred in the bank. And now ... "Why?" he groaned, striking his forehead against his forearms. His arm slipped, and his head hit the top of the fencepost, and the pain blinded him for a moment. He staggered back into the road with a low roar, wiped blood from his forehead, and savagely kicked his bag.

It rolled a couple of yards up the road. He leaped after it and kicked it again. When he had finished with it, he stood panting and angry, but feeling better. He shouldered the bag and hiked on toward the farmhouse.

They're hoofer, that's all--just an Earth-chained bunch of hoofer, even Marie. And I'm a tumbler. A born tumbler. Know what that means? It means--God, what does it mean? It means out in Big Bottomless, where Earth's like a fat moon with fuzzy mold growing on it. Mold, that's all you are, just mold.

A dog barked, and he wondered if he had been muttering aloud. He came to a fence-gap and paused in the darkness. The road wound around and came up the hill in front of the house. Maybe they were sitting on the porch. Maybe they'd already heard him coming. Maybe ...

He was trembling again. He fished the fifth of gin out of his coat pocket and slished it. Still over half a pint. He decided to kill it. It wouldn't do to go home with a bottle sticking out of his pocket. He stood there in the night wind, sipping at it, and watching the reddish moon come up in the east. The moon looked as phoney as the setting sun.

He straightened in sudden determination. It had to be sometime. Get it over with, get it over with now. He opened the fence-gap, slipped through, and closed it firmly behind him. He retrieved his bag, and waded quietly through the tall grass until he reached the hedge which divided an area of sickly peach trees from the field. He got over the hedge somehow, and started through the trees toward the house. He stumbled over some old boards, and they clattered.

"Shhh!" he hissed, and moved on.

The dogs were barking angrily, and he heard a screen door slam. He stopped.
"Ho there!" a male voice called experimentally from the house.

One of Marie's brothers. Hogey stood frozen in the shadow of a peach tree, waiting.

"Anybody out there?" the man called again.

Hogey waited, then heard the man muttering, "Sic 'im, boy, sic 'im."

The hound's bark became eager. The animal came chasing down the slope, and stopped ten feet away to crouch and bark frantically at the shadow in the gloom. He knew the dog.

"Hooky!" he whispered. "Hooky boy--here!"

The dog stopped barking, sniffed, trotted closer, and went "Rrrooff!" Then he started sniffing suspiciously again.

"Easy, Hooky, here boy!" he whispered.

The dog came forward silently, sniffed his hand, and whined in recognition. Then he trotted around Hogey, panting doggy affection and dancing an invitation to romp. The man whistled from the porch. The dog froze, then trotted quickly back up the slope.

"Nothing, eh, Hooky?" the man on the porch said. "Chasin' armadillos again, eh?"

The screen door slammed again, and the porch light went out. Hogey stood there staring, unable to think.

Somewhere beyond the window lights were--his woman, his son.

What the hell was a tumbler doing with a woman and a son?

After perhaps a minute, he stepped forward again. He tripped over a shovel, and his foot plunged into something that went squelch and swallowed the foot past the ankle. He fell forward into a heap of sand, and his foot went deeper into the sloppy wetness.

He lay there with his stinging forehead on his arms, cursing softly and crying. Finally he rolled over, pulled his foot out of the mess, and took off his shoes. They were full of mud--sticky sandy mud.

The dark world was reeling about him, and the wind was dragging at his breath. He fell back against the sand pile and let his feet sink in the mud hole and wriggled his toes. He was laughing soundlessly, and his face was wet in the wind. He couldn't think. He couldn't remember where he was and why, and he stopped caring, and after a while he felt better.

The stars were swimming over him, dancing crazily, and the mud cooled his feet, and the sand was soft behind him. He saw a rocket go up on a tail of flame from the station, and waited for the sound of its blast, but he was already asleep when it came.

It was far past midnight when he became conscious of the dog licking wetly at his ear and cheek. He pushed the animal away with a low curse and mopped at the side of his face. He stirred, and groaned. His feet were burning up! He tried to pull them toward him, but they wouldn't budge. There was something wrong with his legs.

For an instant he stared wildly around in the night. Then he remembered where he was, closed his eyes and shuddered. When he opened them again, the moon had emerged from behind a cloud, and he could see clearly the cruel trap into which he had accidentally stumbled. A pile of old boards, a careful stack of new lumber, a pick and shovel, a sand-pile, heaps of fresh-turned earth, and a concrete mixer--well, it added up.

He gripped his ankles and pulled, but his feet wouldn't budge. In sudden terror, he tried to stand up, but his ankles were clutched by the concrete too, and he fell back in the sand with a low moan. He lay still for several minutes, considering carefully.

He pulled at his left foot. It was locked in a vise. He tugged even more desperately at his right foot. It was equally immovable.

He sat up with a whimper and clawed at the rough concrete until his nails tore and his fingertips bled. The surface still felt damp, but it had hardened while he slept.

He sat there stunned until Hooky began licking at his scuffed fingers. He shouldered the dog away, and dug his hands into the sand-pile to stop the bleeding. Hooky licked at his face, panting love.

"Get away!" he croaked savagely.

The dog whined softly, trotted a short distance away, circled, and came back to crouch down in the sand directly before Hogey, inching forward experimentally.

Hogey gripped fistsful of the dry sand and cursed between his teeth, while his eyes wandered over the sky. They came to rest on the sliver of light--the space station--rising in the west, floating out in Big Bottomless where the gang was--Nichols and Guerrero and Lavrenti and Fats. And he wasn't forgetting Keesey, the rookie who'd replaced him.

Keesey would have a rough time for a while--rough as a cob. The pit was no playground. The first time you went out of the station in a suit, the pit got you. Everything was falling, and you fell, with it. Everything. The skeletons of steel, the tire-shaped station, the spheres and docks and nightmare shapes--all tied together by umbilical cables and flexible tubes. Like some crazy sea-thing they seemed, floating in a black ocean with its tentacles bound
together by drifting strands in the dark tide that bore it.

* * * * *

Everything was pain-bright or dead black, and it wheeled around you, and you went nuts trying to figure which way was down. In fact, it took you months to teach your body that all ways were down and that the pit was bottomless.

He became conscious of a plaintive sound in the wind, and froze to listen.

It was a baby crying.

It was nearly a minute before he got the significance of it. It hit him where he lived, and he began jerking frantically at his encased feet and sobbing low in his throat. They’d hear him if he kept that up. He stopped and covered his ears to close out the cry of his firstborn. A light went on in the house, and when it went off again, the infant’s cry had ceased.

Another rocket went up from the station, and he cursed it. Space was a disease, and he had it.

“Help!” he cried out suddenly. “I'm stuck! Help me, help me!”

He knew he was yelling hysterically at the sky and fighting the relentless concrete that clutched his feet, and after a moment he stopped.

The light was on in the house again, and he heard faint sounds. The stirring-about woke the baby again, and once more the infant's wail came on the breeze.

Make the kid shut up, make the kid shut up ...

But that was no good. It wasn't the kid's fault. It wasn't Marie's fault. No fathers allowed in space, they said, but it wasn't their fault either. They were right, and he had only himself to blame. The kid was an accident, but that didn't change anything. Not a thing in the world. It remained a tragedy.

A tumbler had no business with a family, but what was a man going to do? Take a skinning knife, boy, and make yourself a eunuch. But that was no good either. They needed bulls out there in the pit, not steers. And when a man came down from a year's hitch, what was he going to do? Live in a lonely shack and read books for kicks? Because you were a man, you sought out a woman. And because she was a woman, she got a kid, and that was the end of it. It was nobody's fault, nobody's at all.

He stared at the red eye of Mars low in the southwest. They were running out there now, and next year he would have been on the long long run ...

But there was no use thinking about it. Next year and the years after belonged to little Hogey.

He sat there with his feet locked in the solid concrete of the footing, staring out into Big Bottomless while his son's cry came from the house and the Hauptman menfolk came wading through the tall grass in search of someone who had cried out. His feet were stuck tight, and he wouldn't ever get them out. He was sobbing softly when they found him.

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Contents

PRoblem
by Alan E. Nourse

The letter came down the slot too early that morning to be the regular mail run. Pete Greenwood eyed the New Philly photocancel with a dreadful premonition. The letter said:

PETER: Can you come East chop-chop, urgent? Grdznth problem getting to be a PRoblem, need expert icebox salesman to get gators out of hair fast. Yes? Math boys hot on this, citizens not so hot. Please come. TOMMY

Pete tossed the letter down the gulper with a sigh. He had lost a bet to himself because it had come three days later than he expected, but it had come all the same, just as it always did when Tommy Heinz got himself into a hole.

Not that he didn't like Tommy. Tommy was a good PR-man, as PR-men go. He just didn't know his own depth. PRoblem in a beady Grdznth eye! What Tommy needed right now was a Bazooka Battalion, not a PR-man. Pete settled back in the Eastbound Rocketjet with a sigh of resignation.

He was just dozing off when the fat lady up the aisle let out a scream. A huge reptilian head had materialized out of nowhere and was hanging in air, peering about uncertainly. A scaly green body followed, four feet away, complete with long razor talons, heavy hind legs, and a whiplash tail with a needle at the end. For a moment the creature floated upside down, legs thrashing. Then the head and body joined, executed a horizontal pirouette, and settled gently to the floor like an eight-foot circus balloon.
Two rows down a small boy let out a muffled howl and tried to bury himself in his mother's coat collar. An indignant wail arose from the fat lady. Someone behind Pete groaned aloud and quickly retired behind a newspaper.

The creature coughed apologetically. "Terribly sorry," he said in a coarse rumble. "So difficult to control, you know. Terribly sorry...." His voice trailed off as he lumbered down the aisle toward the empty seat next to Pete.

The fat lady gasped, and an angry murmur ran up and down the cabin. "Sit down," Pete said to the creature. "Relax. Cheerful reception these days, eh?"

"You don't mind?" said the creature.

"Not at all." Pete tossed his briefcase on the floor. At a distance the huge beast had looked like a nightmare combination of large alligator and small tyrannosaurus. Now, at close range Pete could see that the "scales" were actually tiny wrinkles of satiny green fur. He knew, of course, that the Grdznth were mammals--"docile, peace-loving mammals," Tommy's PR-blasts had declared emphatically--but with one of them sitting about a foot away Pete had to fight down a wave of horror and revulsion.

The creature was most incredibly ugly. Great yellow pouches hung down below flat reptilian eyes, and a double row of long curved teeth glittered sharply. In spite of himself Pete gripped the seat as the Grdznth breathed at him wetly through damp nostrils.

"Misgauged?" said Pete.

The Grdznth nodded sadly. "It's horrible of me, but I just can't help it. I always misgauge. Last time it was the chancel of St. John's Cathedral. I nearly stampeded morning prayer--" He paused to catch his breath. "What an effort. The energy barrier, you know. Frightfully hard to make the jump." He broke off sharply, staring out the window. "Dear me! Are we going east?"

"I'm afraid so, friend."

"Oh, dear. I wanted Florida."

"Well, you seem to have drifted through into the wrong airplane," said Pete. "Why Florida?"

The Grdznth looked at him reproachfully. "The Wives, of course. The climate is so much better, and they mustn't be disturbed, you know."

"Of course," said Pete. "In their condition. I'd forgotten."

"And I'm told that things have been somewhat unpleasant in the East just now," said the Grdznth. Pete thought of Tommy, red-faced and frantic, beating off hordes of indignant citizens. "So I hear," he said. "How many more of you are coming through?"

"Oh, not many, not many at all. Only the Wives--half a million or so--and their spouses, of course." The creature clicked his talons nervously. "We haven't much more time, you know. Only a few more weeks, a few months at the most. If we couldn't have stopped over here, I just don't know what we'd have done."

"Think nothing of it," said Pete indulgently. "It's been great having you."

The passengers within earshot stiffened, glaring at Pete. The fat lady was whispering indignantly to her seat companion. Junior had half emerged from his mother's collar; he was busy sticking out his tongue at the Grdznth.

The creature shifted uneasily. "Really, I think--perhaps Florida would be better."

"Going to try it again right now? Don't rush off," said Pete.

"Oh, I don't mean to rush. It's been lovely, but--" Already the Grdznth was beginning to fade out.

"Try four miles down and a thousand miles southeast," said Pete.

The creature gave him a toothy smile, nodded once, and grew more indistinct. In another five seconds the seat was quite empty. Pete leaned back, grinning to himself as the angry rumble rose around him like a wave. He was a Public Relations man to the core--but right now he was off duty. He chuckled to himself, and the passengers avoided him like the plague all the way to New Philly.

But as he walked down the gangway to hail a cab, he wasn't smiling so much. He was wondering just how high Tommy was hanging him, this time.

* * * * *

The lobby of the Public Relations Bureau was swarming like an upturned anthill when Pete disembarked from the taxi. He could almost smell the desperate tension of the place. He fought his way past scurrying clerks and preoccupied poll-takers toward the executive elevators in the rear.

On the newly finished seventeenth floor, he found Tommy Heinz pacing the corridor like an expectant young father. Tommy had lost weight since Pete had last seen him. His ruddy face was paler, his hair thin and ragged as though chunks had been torn out from time to time. He saw Pete step off the elevator, and ran forward with open arms. "I thought you'd never get here!" he groaned. "When you didn't call, I was afraid you'd let me down."

"Me?" said Pete. "I'd never let down a pal."

The sarcasm didn't dent Tommy. He led Pete through the ante-room into the plush director's office, bouncing about excitedly, his words tumbling out like a waterfall. He looked as though one gentle shove might send him
yodeling down Market Street in his underdrawers. "Hold it," said Pete. "Relax, I'm not going to leave for a while yet. Your girl screamed something about a senator as we came in. Did you hear her?"

Tommy gave a violent start. "Senator! Oh, dear." He flipped a desk switch. "What senator is that?"
"Senator Stokes," the girl said wearily. "He had an appointment. He's ready to have you fired."
"All I need now is a senator," Tommy said. "What does he want?"
"Guess," said the girl.
"Oh. That's what I was afraid of. Can you keep him there?"
"Don't worry about that," said the girl. "He's growing roots. They swept around him last night, and dusted him off this morning. His appointment was for yesterday, remember?"
"Remember! Of course I remember. Senator Stokes--something about a riot in Boston." He started to flip the switch, then added, "See if you can get Charlie down here with his giz."

"I fail to see," said Pete, "just why you had to drag me all the way from L.A. to have a cigar. I've got work to do."
"Selling movies, right?" said Tommy.
"Check."
"To people who don't want to buy them, right?"
"In a manner of speaking," said Pete testily.
"Exactly," said Tommy. "Considering some of the movies you've been selling, you should be able to sell anything to anybody, any time, at any price."
"Please. Movies are getting Better by the Day."
"Yes, I know. And the Grdznth are getting worse by the hour. They're coming through in battalions--a thousand a day! The more Grdznth come through, the more they act as though they own the place. Not nasty or anything--it's that infernal politeness that people hate most, I think. Can't get them mad, can't get them into a fight, but they do anything they please, and go anywhere they please, and if the people don't like it, the Grdznth just go right ahead anyway."

Pete pulled at his lip. "Any violence?"

Tommy gave him a long look. "So far we've kept it out of the papers, but there have been some incidents. Didn't hurt the Grdznth a bit--they have personal protective force fields around them, a little point they didn't bother to tell us about. Anybody who tries anything fancy gets thrown like a bolt of lightning hit him. Rumors are getting wild--people saying they can't be killed, that they're just moving in to stay."

Pete nodded slowly. "Are they?"
"I wish I knew. I mean, for sure. The psych-docs say no. The Grdznth agreed to leave at a specified time, and something in their cultural background makes them stick strictly to their agreements. But that's just what the psych-docs think, and they've been known to be wrong."

"And the appointed time?"

Tommy spread his hands helplessly. "If we knew, you'd still be in L.A. Roughly six months and four days, plus or minus a month for the time differential. That's strictly tentative, according to the math boys. It's a parallel universe, one of several thousand already explored, according to the Grdznth scientists working with Charlie Karns. Most of the parallels are analogous, and we happen to be analogous to the Grdznth, a point we've omitted from our PR-blasts. They have an eight-planet system around a hot sun, and it's going to get lots hotter any day now."

Pete's eyes widened. "Nova?"

"Apparently. Nobody knows how they predicted it, but they did. Spotted it coming several years ago, so they've been romping through parallel after parallel trying to find one they can migrate to. They found one, sort of a desperation choice. It's cold and arid and full of impassable mountain chains. With an uphill fight they can make it support a fraction of their population."

Tommy shook his head helplessly. "They picked a very sensible system for getting a good strong Grdznth population on the new parallel as fast as possible. The males were picked for brains, education, ability and adaptability; the females were chosen largely according to how pregnant they were."

Pete grinned. "Grdznth in utero. There's something poetic about it."
"Just one hitch," said Tommy. "The girls can't gestate in that climate, at least not until they've been there long enough to get their glands adjusted. Seems we have just the right climate here for gestating Grdznth, even better than at home. So they came begging for permission to stop here, on the way through, to rest and parturiate."
"So Earth becomes a glorified incubator." Pete got to his feet thoughtfully. "This is all very touching," he said, "but it just doesn't wash. If the Grdznth are so unpopular with the masses, why did we let them in here in the first
place?” He looked narrowly at Tommy. "To be very blunt, what’s the parking fee?"

"Plenty,” said Tommy heavily. "That’s the trouble, you see. The fee is so high, Earth just can't afford to lose it. Charlie Karns'll tell you why."

* * * * *

Charlie Karns from Math Section was an intense skeleton of a man with a long jaw and a long white coat drooping over his shoulders like a shroud. In his arms he clutched a small black box.

"It's the parallel universe business, of course," he said to Pete, with Tommy beaming over his shoulder. "The Grdznth can cross through. They've been able to do it for a long time. According to our figuring, this must involve complete control of mass, space and dimension, all three. And time comes into one of the three--we aren't sure which."

The mathematician set the black box on the desk top and released the lid. Like a jack-in-the-box, two small white plastic spheres popped out and began chasing each other about in the air six inches above the box. Presently a third sphere rose up from the box and joined the fun.

Pete watched it with his jaw sagging until his head began to spin. "No wires?"

"Strictly no wires,” said Charlie glumly. "No nothing." He closed the box with a click. "This is one of their children's toys, and theoretically, it can't work. Among other things, it takes null-gravity to operate." Pete sat down, rubbing his chin. "Yes," he said. "I'm beginning to see. They're teaching you this?"

Tommy said, "They're trying to. He's been working for weeks with their top mathematicians, him and a dozen others. How many computers have you burned out, Charlie?"

"Four. There's a differential factor, and we can't spot it. They have the equations, all right. It's a matter of translating them into constants that make sense. But we haven't cracked the differential."

"And if you do, then what?"

Charlie took a deep breath. "We'll have inter-dimensional control, a practical, utilizable transmatter. We'll have null-gravity, which means the greatest advance in power utilization since fire was discovered. It might give us the opening to a concept of time travel that makes some kind of sense. And power! If there's an energy differential of any magnitude--" He shook his head sadly.

"We'll also know the time-differential,” said Tommy hopefully, "and how long the Grdznth gestation period will be."

"It's a fair exchange,” said Charlie. "We keep them until the girls have their babies. They teach us the ABC's of space, mass and dimension." Pete nodded. "That is, if you can make the people put up with them for another six months or so."

Tommy sighed. "In a word--yes. So far we've gotten nowhere at a thousand miles an hour."

* * * * *

"I can't do it!” the cosmetician wailed, hurling himself down on a chair and burying his face in his hands. "I've failed. Failed!"

The Grdznth sitting on the stool looked regretfully from the cosmetician to the Public Relations men. "I say--I am sorry...." His coarse voice trailed off as he peeled a long strip of cake makeup off his satiny green face.

Pete Greenwood stared at the cosmetician sobbing in the chair. "What's eating him?"

"Professional pride," said Tommy. "He can take twenty years off the face of any woman in Hollywood. But he's not getting to first base with Gorgeous over there. This is only one thing we've tried," he added as they moved on down the corridor. "You should see the field reports. We've tried selling the advances Earth will have, the wealth, the power. No dice. The man on the street reads our PR-blasts, and then looks up to see one of the nasty things staring over his shoulder at the newspaper."

"So you can't make them beautiful," said Pete. "Can't you make them cute?"

"With those teeth? Those eyes? Ugh."

"How about the 'jolly company' approach?"

"Tried it. There's nothing jolly about them. They pop out of nowhere, anywhere. In church, in bedrooms, in rush-hour traffic through Lincoln Tunnel--look!"

Pete peered out the window at the traffic jam below. Cars were snarled up for blocks on either side of the intersection. A squad of traffic cops were converging angrily on the center of the mess, where a stream of green reptilian figures seemed to be popping out of the street and lumbering through the jammed autos like General Sherman tanks.

"Ulcers," said Tommy. "City traffic isn't enough of a mess as it is. And they don't do anything about it. They apologize profusely, but they keep coming through." The two started on for the office. "Things are getting to the breaking point. The people are wearing thin from sheer annoyance--to say nothing of the nightmares the kids are having, and the trouble with women fainting."
The signal light on Tommy's desk was flashing scarlet. He dropped into a chair with a sigh and flipped a switch. "Okay, what is it now?"

"Just another senator," said a furious male voice. "Mr. Heinz, my arthritis is beginning to win this fight. Are you going to see me now, or aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, come right in!" Tommy turned white. "Senator Stokes," he muttered. "I'd completely forgotten--"

The senator didn't seem to like being forgotten. He walked into the office, looked disdainfully at the PR-men, and sank to the edge of a chair, leaning on his umbrella.

"You have just lost your job," he said to Tommy, with an icy edge to his voice. "You may not have heard about it yet, but you can take my word for it. I personally will be delighted to make the necessary arrangements, but I doubt if I'll need to. There are at least a hundred senators in Washington who are ready to press for your dismissal, Mr. Heinz--and there's been some off-the-record talk about a lynching. Nothing official, of course."

"Senator--"

"Senator be hanged! We want somebody in this office who can manage to do something."

"Do something! You think I'm a magician? I can just make them vanish? What do you want me to do?"

The senator raised his eyebrows. "You needn't shout, Mr. Heinz. I'm not the least interested in what you do. My interest is focused completely on a collection of five thousand letters, telegrams, and visiphone calls I've received in the past three days alone. My constituents, Mr. Heinz, are making themselves clear. If the Grdznth do not go, I go."

"That would never do, of course," murmured Pete.

The senator gave Pete a cold, clinical look. "Who is this person?" he asked Tommy.

"An assistant on the job," Tommy said quickly. "A very excellent PR-man."

The senator sniffed audibly. "Full of ideas, no doubt."

"Brimming," said Pete. "Enough ideas to get your constituents off your neck for a while, at least."

"Indeed."

"Indeed," said Pete. "Tommy, how fast can you get a PR-blast to penetrate? How much medium do you control?"

"Plenty," Tommy gulped.

"And how fast can you sample response and analyze it?"

"We can have prelims six hours after the PR-blast. Pete, if you have an idea, tell us!"

Pete stood up, facing the senator. "Everything else has been tried, but it seems to me one important factor has been missed. One that will take your constituents by the ears. He looked at Tommy pityingly. "You've tried to make them lovable, but they aren't lovable. They aren't even passably attractive. There's one thing they are though, at least half of them."

Tommy's jaw sagged. "Pregnant," he said.

"Now see here," said the senator. "If you're trying to make a fool out of me to my face--"

"Sit down and shut up," said Pete. "If there's one thing the man in the street reveres, my friend, it's motherhood. We've got several hundred thousand pregnant Grdznth just waiting for all the little Grdznth to arrive, and nobody's given them a side glance." He turned to Tommy. "Get some copywriters down here. Get a Grdznth obstetrician or two. We're going to put together a PR-blast that will twang the people's heart-strings like a billion harps."

The color was back in Tommy's cheeks, and the senator was forgotten as a dozen intercom switches began snapping. "We'll need TV hookups, and plenty of newscast space," he said eagerly. "Maybe a few photographs--do you suppose maybe baby Grdznth are lovable?"

"They probably look like salamanders," said Pete. "But tell the people anything you want. If we're going to get across the sanctity of Grdznth motherhood, my friend, anything goes."

"It's genius," chortled Tommy. "Sheer genius."

"If it sells," the senator added, dubiously.

"It'll sell," Pete said. "The question is: for how long?"

* * * * *

The planning revealed the mark of genius. Nothing sudden, harsh, or crude--but slowly, in a radio comment here or a newspaper story there, the emphasis began to shift from Grdznth in general to Grdznth as mothers. A Rutgers professor found his TV discussion on "Motherhood as an Experience" suddenly shifted from 6:30 Monday evening to 10:30 Saturday night. Copy rolled by the ream from Tommy's office, refined copy, hypersensitively edited copy, finding its way into the light of day through devious channels.

Three days later a Grdznth miscarriage threatened, and was averted. It was only a page 4 item, but it was a beginning.

Determined movements to expel the Grdznth faltered, trembled with indecision. The Grdznth were ugly, they frightened little children, they were a trifle overbearing in their insufferable stubborn politeness--but in a civilized
world you just couldn't turn expectant mothers out in the rain.

Not even expectant Grdznth mothers.

By the second week the blast was going at full tilt.

In the Public Relations Bureau building, machines worked on into the night. As questionnaires came back, spot candid films and street-corner interview tapes ran through the projectors on a twenty-four-hour schedule. Tommy Heinz grew thinner and thinner, while Pete nursed sharp post-prandial stomach pains.

"Why don't people respond?" Tommy asked plaintively on the morning the third week started. "Haven't they got any feelings? The blast is washing over them like a wave and there they sit!" He punched the private wire to Analysis for the fourth time that morning. He got a man with a hag-ridden look in his eye. "How soon?"

"You want yesterday's rushes?"

"What do you think I want? Any sign of a lag?"

"Not a hint. Last night's panel drew like a magnet. The D-Date tag you suggested has them by the nose."

"How about the President's talk?"

The man from Analysis grinned. "He should be campaigning."

Tommy mopped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "Okay. Now listen: we need a special run on all response data we have for tolerance levels. Got that? How soon can we have it?"

Analysis shook his head. "We could only make a guess with the data so far."

"Fine," said Tommy. "Make a guess."

"Give us three hours," said Analysis.

"You've got thirty minutes. Get going."

Turning back to Pete, Tommy rubbed his hands eagerly. "It's starting to sell, boy. I don't know how strong or how good, but it's starting to sell! With the tolerance levels to tell us how long we can expect this program to quiet things down, we can give Charlie a deadline to crack his differential factor, or it's the ax for Charlie." He chuckled to himself, and paced the room in an overflow of nervous energy. "I can see it now. Open shafts instead of elevators. A quick hop to Honolulu for an afternoon on the beach, and back in time for supper. A hundred miles to the gallon for the Sunday driver. When people begin seeing what the Grdznth are giving us, they'll welcome them with open arms."

"Hmm," said Pete.

"Well, why won't they? The people just didn't trust us, that was all. What does the man in the street know about transmatters? Nothing. But give him one, and then try to take it away."

"Sure, sure," said Pete. "It sounds great. Just a little bit too great."

Tommy blinked at him. "Too great? Are you crazy?"

"Not crazy. Just getting nervous." Pete jammed his hands into his pockets. "Do you realize where we're standing in this thing? We're out on a limb--way out. We're fighting for time--time for Charlie and his gang to crack the puzzle, time for the Grdznth girls to gestate. But what are we hearing from Charlie?"

"Pete, Charlie can't just--"

"That's right," said Pete. "Nothing is what we're hearing from Charlie. We've got no transmatter, no null-G, no power, nothing except a whole lot of Grdznth and more coming through just as fast as they can. I'm beginning to wonder what the Grdznth are giving us."

"Well, they can't gestate forever."

"Maybe not, but I still have a burning desire to talk to Charlie. Something tells me they're going to be gestating a little too long."

They put through the call, but Charlie wasn't answering. "Sorry," the operator said. "Nobody's gotten through there for three days."

"Three days?" cried Tommy. "What's wrong? Is he dead?"

"Couldn't be. They burned out two more machines yesterday," said the operator. "Killed the switchboard for twenty minutes."

"Get him on the wire," Tommy said. "That's orders."

"Yes, sir. But first they want you in Analysis."

Analysis was a shambles. Paper and tape piled knee-deep on the floor. The machines clattered wildly, coughing out reams of paper to be gulped up by other machines. In a corner office they found the Analysis man, pale but jubilant.

"The Program," Tommy said. "How's it going?"

"You can count on the people staying happy for at least another five months." Analysis hesitated an instant. "If they see some baby Grdznth at the end of it all."

There was dead silence in the room. "Baby Grdznth," Tommy said finally.
"That's what I said. That's what the people are buying. That's what they'd better get."
Tommy swallowed hard. "And if it happens to be six months?"
Analysis drew a finger across his throat.
Tommy and Pete looked at each other, and Tommy's hands were shaking. "I think," he said, "we'd better find Charlie Karns right now."

Math Section was like a tomb. The machines were silent. In the office at the end of the room they found an unshaven Charlie gulping a cup of coffee with a very smug-looking Grdznth. The coffee pot was floating gently about six feet above the desk. So were the Grdznth and Charlie.
"Charlie!" Tommy howled. "We've been trying to get you for hours! The operator--"
"I know, I know." Charlie waved a hand disjointedly. "I told her to go away. I told the rest of the crew to go away, too."
"Then you cracked the differential?"
Charlie tipped an imaginary hat toward the Grdznth. "Spike cracked it," he said. "Spike is a sort of Grdznth genius." He tossed the coffee cup over his shoulder and it ricocheted in graceful slow motion against the far wall.
"Now why don't you go away, too?"
Tommy turned purple. "We've got five months," he said hoarsely. "Do you hear me? If they aren't going to have their babies in five months, we're dead men."
Charlie chuckled. "Five months, he says. We figured the babies to come in about three months--right, Spike? Not that it'll make much difference to us," Charlie sank slowly down to the desk. He wasn't laughing any more. "We're never going to see any Grdznth babies. It's going to be a little too cold for that. The energy factor," he mumbled. "Nobody thought of that except in passing. Should have, though, long ago. Two completely independent universes, obviously two energy systems. Incompatible. We were dealing with mass, space and dimension--but the energy differential was the important one."
"What about the energy?"
"We're loaded with it. Super-charged. Packed to the breaking point and way beyond." Charlie scribbled frantically on the desk pad. "Look, it took energy for them to come through--immense quantities of energy. Every one that came through upset the balance, distorted our whole energy pattern. And they knew from the start that the differential was all on their side--a million of them unbalances four billion of us. All they needed to overload us completely was time for enough crossings."
"And we gave it to them." Pete sat down slowly, his face green. "Like a rubber ball with a dent in the side. Push in one side, the other side pops out. And we're the other side. When?"
"Any day now. Maybe any minute." Charlie spread his hands helplessly. "Oh, it won't be bad at all. Spike here was telling me. Mean temperature in only 39 below zero, lots of good clean snow, thousands of nice jagged mountain peaks. A lovely place, really. Just a little too cold for Grdznth. They thought Earth was much nicer."
"For them," whispered Tommy.
"For them," Charlie said.

Contents

THE RETURN
By H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire

I
Altamont cast a quick, routine glance at the instrument panels and then looked down through the transparent nose of the helicopter at the yellow-brown river five hundred feet below. Next he scraped the last morsel from his plate and ate it.
"What did you make this out of, Jim?" he asked. "I hope you kept notes while you were concocting it. It's good."
"The two smoked pork chops left over from yesterday evening," Loudons said, "and that bowl of rice that's been taking up space in the refrigerator the last couple of days, together with a little egg powder and some milk. I ground the chops up and mixed them with the rice and other stuff. Then added some bacon, to make grease to fry it in."
Altamont chuckled. That was Loudons, all right: he could take a few left-overs, mess them together, pop them
in the skillet, and have a meal that would turn the chef back at the Fort green with envy. He filled his cup and offered the pot.

"Caffchoc?" he asked.

Loudons held his cup out to be filled, blew on it, sipped, and then hunted on the ledge under the desk for the butt of the cigar he had half-smoked the evening before.

"Did you ever drink coffee, Monty?" the socio-psychologist asked, getting the cigar drawing to his taste.

"Coffee? No. I've read about it, of course. We'll have to organize an expedition to Brazil, sometime, to get seeds and try raising some."

Loudons blew a smoke ring toward the rear of the cabin.

"A much overrated beverage," he replied. "We found some, once, when I was on that expedition into Idaho, in what must have been the stockroom of a hotel. Vacuum-packed in moisture-proof containers, and free from radioactivity. It wasn't nearly as good as caffchoc.

"But then, I suppose, a pre-bustup coffee drinker couldn't stomach this stuff we're drinking."

Loudons looked forward, up the river they were following. "Get anything on the radio?" he asked. "I noticed you took us up to about ten thousand, while I was shaving."

Altamont got out his pipe and tobacco pouch, filling the former slowly and carefully.

"Not a whisper. I tried Colony Three, in the Ozarks, and I tried to call in that tribe of workers in Louisiana. I couldn't get either."

"Maybe if we tried to get a little more power on the set...."

That was Loudons, too, Altamont thought. There wasn't a better man at the Fort, when it came to dealing with people. But confront him with a problem about things and he was lost.

That was one of the reasons why he and the stocky, phlegmatic social scientist made such a good team, he thought. As far as he, himself, was concerned, people were just a mysterious, exasperatingly unpredictable order of things which were subject to no known natural laws.

And Loudons thought the same thing about machines: he couldn't psychoanalyze them.

Altamont gestured with his pipe toward the nuclear-electric conversion unit, between the control-cabin and the living quarters in the rear of the boxcar-sized helicopter.

"We have enough power back there to keep this windmill in the air twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, for the next fifteen years," he said. "If I'd step up the power on this set any more, it'd burn out before I could say, 'Altamont calling Fort Ridgeway.'"

"How far are we from Pittsburgh now?" Loudons wanted to know.

Altamont looked across the cabin at the big map of the United States as they had been, the red and green and blue and yellow patchwork of vanished political divisions. The colors gleamed through the transparent overlay on which this voyage of re-discovery was plotted.

The red line of their journey started at Fort Ridgeway, in what had been Arizona. It angled east by a little north, to Colony Three, in northern Arkansas ... sharply northeast to St. Louis and its lifeless ruins ... then to Chicago and Gary, where little bands of Stone Age reversions stalked and fought and ate each other ... Detroit, where things that had completely forgotten they were human emerged from their burrows only at night ... Cleveland, where a couple of cobalt bombs must have landed in the lake and drenched everything with radioactivity that still lingered after two centuries ... Akron, where vegetation was only beginning to break through the glassy slag ... Cincinnati, where they had last stopped....

"How's the leg this morning, Jim?" he asked.

"Little stiff. Doesn't hurt much, though."

"Why, we're about fifty miles, as we follow that river, and that's relatively straight." He looked down through the transparent nose of the copter at a town, now choked with trees that grew among the tumbled walls. "I think that's Aliquippa."

Loudons looked and shrugged, then looked again and pointed.

"There's a bear. Just ducked into that church or movie theater or whatever. I wonder what he thinks we are."

Altamont puffed slowly at his pipe. "I wonder if we're going to find anything at all in Pittsburgh."

"You mean people, as distinct from those biped beasts we've found so far? I doubt it," Loudons replied, finishing his caffchoc and wiping his mustache with the back of his hand. "I think the whole eastern half of the country is nothing but forest like this, and the highest type of life is just about three cuts below Homo Neanderthalensis, almost impossible to contact, and even more impossible to educate."

"I wasn't thinking about that. I've just about given up hope of finding anybody or even a reasonably high level of barbarism," Altamont said. "I was thinking about that cache of microfilmed books that was buried at the Carnegie Library."
"If it was buried," Loudons qualified. "All we have is that article in that two-century-old copy of Time about how the people at the library had constructed the crypt and were beginning the microfilming. We don't know if they ever had a chance to get it finished, before the rockets started landing."

They passed over a dam of flotsam that had banked up at a wrecked bridge and accumulated enough mass to resist the periodic floods that had kept the river usually clear. Three human figures fled across a sand-flat at one end of it and disappeared into the woods. Two of them carried spears tipped with something that sparkled in the sunlight, probably shards of glass.

"You know, Monty, I get nightmares, sometimes, thinking about what things must be like in Europe," Loudons said.

Five or six wild cows went crashing through the brush below. Altamont nodded when he saw them.
"Maybe tomorrow, we'll let down and shoot a cow," he said. "I was looking in the freeze-locker and the fresh meat's getting a little low. Or a wild pig, if we find a good stand of oak trees. I could enjoy what you'd do with some acorn-fed pork."

He looked across the table. "Finished?" he asked Loudons. "Take over, then. I'll go back and wash the dishes."

They rose, and Loudons, favoring his left leg, moved over to the seat at the controls.

Altamont gathered up the two cups, the stainless-steel dishes, and the knives and the forks and spoons, going up the steps over the shielded converter and ducking his head to avoid the seat in the forward top machine-gun turret. He washed and dried the dishes, noting with satisfaction that the gauge of the water tank was still reasonably high, and glanced out one of the windows. Loudons was taking the big helicopter upstairs, for a better view.

Now and then, among the trees, there would be a glint of glassy slag, usually in a fairly small circle. That was to be expected: beside the three or four H-bombs that had fallen on the Pittsburgh area, mentioned in the transcripts of the last news to reach the Fort from the outside, the whole district had been pelted, more or less at random, with fission bombs.

West of the confluence of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, it would probably be worse than this.
"Can you see Pittsburgh yet, Jim?" he called out.
"Yes, it's a mess! Worse than Gary, worse than Akron even."
"Monty! Come here! I think I have something!"

Picking up the pipe he had laid down, Altamont hurried forward, dodging his six-foot length under the gun turret and swinging down from the walkway over the converter.
"What is it?" he asked.
"Smoke. A lot of smoke, twenty or thirty fires at the very least."

Loudons had shifted from Forward to Hover and was peering through a pair of binoculars. "See that island, the long one? Across the river from it, on the north side, toward this end. Yes, by Einstein! And I can see cleared ground, and what I think are houses, inside a stockade...."

II

Murray Hughes walked around the corner of the cabin into the morning sunlight, lacing his trousers, with his hunting shirt thrown over his bare shoulders. He found, without much surprise, that his father had also slept late. Verner Hughes was just beginning to shave.

Inside the kitchen, his mother and the girls were clattering pots and skillets.

Outside the kitchen door, his younger brother, Hector, was noisily chopping wood.

Going through the door, he filled another of the light-metal basins with hot water, found his razor, and went outside again, setting the basin on the bench.

Most of the ware in the Hughes cabin was of light-metal. Murray and his father had mined it in the dead city up the river, from a place where it had floated to the top of a puddle of slag, back when the city had been blasted, at the end of the hard times.

It had been hard work, but the stuff had been easy to carry down to where they had hidden their boat. And, for once, they'd had no trouble with the Scowrers.

Too bad they couldn't say as much for yesterday's hunting trip!

As he rubbed lather into the stubble on his face, he cursed with irritation. That had been a bad-luck hunt, all around.

They had gone out before dawn, hunting into the hills to the north. They'd spent the day at it, and shot one small wild pig. Lucky it was small, at that. They'd have had to abandon a full-grown one, after the Scowrers had begun hunting them. Six of them, as big a band as he'd ever seen together at one time, had managed to cut them off from the stockade. He and his father had been forced to circle miles out of their way.

His father had shot one, and he'd had to leave his hatchet sticking in the skull of another, when his rifle had misfired.
That meant a trip to the gunsmith's, for a new hatchet and to have the mainspring of the rifle replaced. Nobody could afford to have a rifle that couldn't be trusted, least of all a hunter and prospector.

On top of everything else, he had had a few words with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, the other day. Well, at least that could be smoothed over. Barrett would be glad to do business with him, once the gunsmith saw that hard tool-steel he had dug out of that place down the river. Hardest steel either he or his father had ever found, and it hadn't been atom-spoiled, either.

He cleaned, wiped and stropped his razor and put it back in the case. He threw out the wash-water on the compost pile and went into the cabin, putting on his shirt and his belt. Then he passed through to the front porch, where his father was already eating at the table.

The people of the Toon like to eat in the open. It was something they'd always done, just as they'd always like to eat together in the evenings.

He sweetened his cup of chicory with a lump of maple sugar and began to sip it before he sat down, standing with one foot on the bench and looking down across the parade ground, past the Aitch-Cue House, toward the river and the wall.

"If you're coming around to Alex's way of thinking--and mine--it won't hurt you to admit it, son," his father said.

Murray turned, looking at his father with the beginning of anger, and then he grinned. The elders were constantly keeping the young men alert with these tests. He checked back over his actions since he had come out onto the porch.

... to the table, sugar in his chicory, one foot on the bench ... which had reminded him again of the absence of the hatchet from his belt and brought an automatic frown ... then the glance toward the gunsmith's shop, and across the parade ground ... the glance including the houses into which so much labor had gone, the wall that had been built from rubble and topped with pointed stakes, the white slabs of marble that marked the graves of the First Tenant and the men of the Old Toon....

He had thought, at that moment, that maybe his father and Alex Barrett and Reader Rawson and Tenant Mycroft Jones and the others were right: there were too many things here that could not be moved along with them, if they decided to move.

It would be false modesty, refusal to see things as they were, not to admit that he was the leader of the younger men, and the boys of the Irregulars. He had been forced to face the responsibilities of that fact since last winter.

Then, the usual theological arguments about the proper order of the Sacred Books and the true nature of the Risen One had been replaced by a violent controversy when Sholto Jiminez and Birdy Edwards had reopened the old question of the advisability of moving the Toon and settling elsewhere.

He had been in favor of the idea himself and found that the other young men had followed his lead. But, for the last month or so, he had begun to doubt the wisdom of it.

It was probably reluctance to admit this to himself that had brought on the strained feelings between himself and his old friend, the gunsmith.

"I'll have to drill the Irregulars, today," he said. "Birdy Edwards has been drilling them while we've been hunting. But I'll go up and see Alex about a new hatchet and fixing my rifle. I'll have a talk with him."

He stepped forward to the edge of the porch, still munching on a honey-dipped piece of cornbread, and glanced up at the sky. That was a queer bird; he had never seen a bird with a wing action like that.

Then he realized that the object was not a bird at all.

His father was staring at it, too.

"Murray! That's ... that's like the old stories from the time of the wars!"

But Murray was already racing across the parade ground toward the Aitch-Cue House, where the big iron ring hung by its chain from a gallows-like post, with a hammer beside it.

III

The stockaded village became larger, details grew plainer, as the helicopter came slanting down and began spiraling around it.

It was a fairly big place, some forty or fifty acres in a rough parallelogram, surrounded by a wall of varicolored stone and brick and concrete rubble from old ruins, topped with a palisade of pointed poles. There was a small jetty projecting into the river, to which six or eight boats of different sorts were tied; a gate opened onto this from the wall.

Inside the stockade, there were close to a hundred buildings, ranging from small cabins to a structure with a belfry. It seemed to have been a church, partly ruined in the war of two centuries ago and later rebuilt.

A stream came down from the woods, across the cultivated land around the fortified village. There was a rough flume which carried the water from a dam close to the edge of the forest and provided a fall to turn a mill wheel.
"Look, strip farming," Loudons pointed. "See the alternate strips of grass and plowed ground. These people understand soil conservation.

"They have horses, too."

As he spoke, three riders left the village at a gallop. They separated, and the people in the fields, who had all started for the village, turned and began hurrying toward the woods. Two of the riders headed for a pasture in which cattle had been grazing and started herding them also into the woods.

For a while, there was a scurrying of little figures in the village below. Then, not a moving thing was in sight.

"There's good organization," Loudons said. "Everybody seems to know what to do, and how to get it done promptly. And look how neat the whole place is. Policed up. I'll bet anything we'll find that they have a military organization, or a military tradition at least.

"We'll have a lot to find out: you can't understand a people until you understand their background and their social organization."

"Humph. Let me have a look at their artifacts: that will tell what kind of people they are," Altamont said, swinging the glasses back and forth over the enclosure. "Water-power mill, water-power sawmill--building on the left side of the water wheel, see the pile of fresh lumber beside it. Blacksmith shop, and from that chimney, I'd say a small foundry, too.

"Wonder what that little building out on the tip of the island is, it has a water wheel too. Undershot wheel, and it looks like it could be raised or lowered. Now, I wonder...."

"Monty, I think we ought to land right in the middle of the enclosure, on that open plaza thing, in front of the building that looks like a reconditioned church. That's probably the Royal Palace, or the Pentagon, or the Kremlin, or whatever."

Altamont started to object, paused, and then nodded. "I think you're right, Jim. From the way they scattered, and got their livestock into the woods, they probably expect us to bomb them. We have to get inside and that's the quickest way to do it." He thought for a moment. "We'd better be armed, when we go out. Pistols, auto-carbines, and a few of those concussion-grenades in case we have to break up a concerted attack. I'll get them."

The plaza, the houses and the cabins around it, the two-hundred-year-old church, all were silent and apparently lifeless as they set the helicopter down. Once Loudons caught a movement inside the door of a house, and saw a metallic glint.

"There's a gun up there," he said. "Looks like a four-pounder. Brass. I knew that smith-shop was also a foundry. See that little curl of smoke? That's the gunner's slow-match.

"I'd thought maybe that thing on the island was a powder mill. That would be where they'd put it. Probably extract their niter from the dung of their horses and cows. Sulfur probably from coal-mine drainage.

"Jim, this is really something!"

"I hope they don't cut loose with that thing," Loudons said, looking apprehensively at the brass-rimmed black muzzle that was covering them from the belfry. "I wonder if we ought to--Oh-oh, here they come!"

Three or four young men stepped out of the wide door of the old church. They wore fringed buckskin trousers and buckskin shirts and odd caps of deerskin with visors to shade the eyes and similar beaks behind to protect the neck. They had powder horns and bullet pouches slung over their shoulders, and long rifles in their hands. They stepped aside as soon as they were out. Carefully avoiding any gesture of menace, they simply stood, watching the helicopter which had landed in their village.

Three other men followed them out. They, too, wore buckskins and the odd double-visored caps. One had a close-cropped white beard, and on the shoulders of his buckskin shirt, he wore the single silver bars of a first lieutenant of the vanished United States Army. He had a pistol on his belt. The pistol had the saw-handle grip of an automatic, but it was a flintlock, as were the rifles of the young men who stood so watchfully on either side of the door.

Two middle-aged men accompanied the bearded man and the trio advanced toward the helicopter.

"All right, come on, Monty."

Loudons opened the door and let down the steps. Picking up an auto-carbine, he slung it and stepped out of the helicopter, Altamont behind him. They advanced to meet the party from the church, halting when they were about twenty feet apart.

"I must apologize, lieutenant, for dropping in on you so unceremoniously."

Loudons stopped, wondering if the man with the white beard understood a word of what he was saying.

"The natural way to come in, when you travel in the air," the old man replied. "At least, you came in openly. I can promise you a better reception than that you got at the city to the west of us a couple of days ago."

"Now how did you know that we had trouble the day-before-yesterday?" Loudons demanded.

The old man's eyes sparkled with child-like pleasure. "That surprises you, my dear sir? In a moment, I daresay
you'll be surprised at the simplicity of it.

"You have a nasty rip in the left leg of your trousers, and the cloth around it is stained with blood. Through the rip, I perceive a bandage. Obviously, you have suffered a recent wound. I further observe that the side of your flying machine bears recent scratches, as though from the spears or throwing hatchets of the Scowrers. Evidently, they attacked you as you were landing. It is fortunate that these cannibal devils are too stupid and too anxious for human flesh to exercise patience."

"Well, that explains how you knew that we'd recently been attacked," Loudons told him. "But how did you guess that it had been to the west of here, in a ruined city?"

"I never guess," the oldster with the silver bar and the keystone-shaped red patch on his left shoulder replied. "It is a shocking habit--destructive to the logical faculties. What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought.

"For example, the wheels and their framework under your flying machine are splashed with mud which seems to be predominantly brick-dust, mixed with plaster. Obviously, you landed recently in a dead city, either during or after a rain. There was a rain here yesterday evening, the wind being from the west. Obviously, you followed behind the rain as it came up the river. And now that I look at your boots, I see traces of the same sort of mud, around the soles and in front of the heels.

"But this is heartless of us, keeping you standing here on a wounded leg, sir. Come in, and let our medic take a look at it."

"Well, thank you, lieutenant," Loudons replied. "But don't bother your medic. I've attended to the wound myself, and it wasn't serious to begin with."

"You are a doctor?" the white-haired man asked.

"Of sorts. A sort of general scientist. My name is Loudons. My friend, Mr. Altamont, here, is a scientist, too."

There was an immediate reaction: all three of the elders of the village, and the young riflemen who had accompanied them, exchanged glances of surprise.

Loudons dropped his hand to the grip of his slung auto-carbine and Altamont sidled away from his partner, his hand moving as if by accident toward the butt of his pistol. The same thought was in both men's minds, that these people might feel, as the heritage of the war of two centuries ago, a hostility to science and scientists.

There was no hostility, however, in their manner as the old man came forward with outstretched hand.

"I am Tenant Mycroft Jones, the Toon Leader here," he said. "This is Stamford Rawson, our Reader, and Verner Hughes, our Toon Sarge. This is his son, Murray Hughes, the Toon Sarge of the Irregulars.

"But come into the Aitch-Cue House, gentlemen. We have much to talk about."

* * * * *

By this time, the villagers had begun to emerge from the log cabins and rubble-walled houses around the plaza and the old church. Some of them, mostly the young men, were carrying rifles, but the majority were unarmed. About half of them were women, in short deerskin skirts or homespun dresses. There were a number of children, the younger ones almost completely naked.

"Sarge," the old man told one of the youths, "post a guard over this flying machine. Don't let anybody meddle with it. And have all the noncoms and techs report here, on the double." He turned and shouted up at the truncated steeple: "Atherton, sound 'All Clear!'"

A horn up in the belfry began blowing, apparently to advise the people who had run from the fields into the forest that there was no danger.

They went through the open doorway of the old stone church and entered the big room inside. The building had evidently once been gutted by fire, two centuries ago, but portions of the wall had been restored. The floor had been replaced by one of rough planks, and there was a plank ceiling at about ten feet.

The room was apparently used as a community center. There were a number of benches and chairs, all very neatly made; and along one wall, out of the way, ten or fifteen long tables had been stacked, the tops in a pile and the trestles on the tops.

The walls were decorated with trophies of weapons--a number of M-12 rifles and M-16 submachine-guns, all in good, clean condition; a light machine rifle; two bazookas. Among them were cruder weapons, stone-and metal-tipped spears and clubs, the work of the wild men of the woods.

A stairway led to the second floor, and it was up this stairway that the man who bore the title of Toon Leader conducted them, to a small room furnished with a long table, a number of chairs, and several big wooden chests bound with iron.

"Sit down, gentlemen," the Toon Leader invited, going to a cupboard and producing a large bottle stoppered with a corncob and a number of small cups.

"It's a little early in the day," he went on, "but this is a very special occasion."
"You smoke a pipe, I take it?" he asked Altamont. "Then try some of this, of our own growth and curing."

He extended a doeskin moccasin, which seemed to be the tobacco container.

Altamont looked at the thing dubiously, then filled his pipe from it.

The oldster drew his pistol, pushed a little wooden plug into the vent, added some tow to the priming, and, aiming at the wall, snapped it. Evidently, at time the formality of plugging the vent had been overlooked: there were a number of holes in the wall there.

This time, however, the pistol didn't go off. The old man shook out the smoldering tow, blew it into flame, and lit a candle from it, offering the light to Altamont.

Loudons got out a cigar and lit it from the candle; the others filled and lighted pipes. The Toon Leader reprimed his pistol, then holstered it, took off his belt and laid it aside, an example the others followed.

They drank ceremoniously, and then seated themselves at the table. As they did, two more men entered the room. They were introduced as Alexander Barrett, the gunsmith and Stanley Markovitch, the distiller.

The Toon Leader began by asking, "You come, then, from the west?"

"Are you from Utah?" the gunsmith interrupted, suspiciously.

"Why, no, we're from Arizona. A place called Fort Ridgeway," Loudons said.

The others nodded, in the manner of people who wish to conceal ignorance. It was obvious that none of them had ever heard of Fort Ridgeway, or Arizona either.

"You say you come from a fort? Then the wars aren't over yet?" Sarge Hughes asked.

"The wars have been over for a long time. You know how terrible they were. You know how few in all the countries were left alive," Loudons said.

"None that we know of, beside ourselves and the Scowrers, until you came," the Toon Leader said.

"We have found only a few small groups, in the whole country, who have managed to save anything of the Old Times. Most of them lived in little villages and cultivated land. A few had horses or cows. None, that we have ever found before, made guns and powder for themselves. But they remembered that they were men, and did not eat one another.

"Whenever we find a group of people like this, we try to persuade them to let us help them."

"Why?" the Toon Leader asked. "Why do you do this for people that you have never met before? What do you want from them--from us--in return for your help?"

He was speaking to Altamont, rather than to Loudons. It seemed obvious that he believed Altamont to be the leader and Loudons the subordinate.

"Because we are trying to bring back the best of the Old Times," Altamont told him. "Look, you have had troubles, here. So have we, many times. Years when the crops didn't... didn't...." He looked at Loudons, aware that his partner should be talking now, and also suddenly aware that Loudons had recognized the situation and left the leadership up to him....

"... years that the crops failed. Years of storms, or floods. Troubles with those beast-men in the woods.

"And you were alone, as we were, with no one to help.

"We want to put all men who are still men in touch with one another, so that they can help each other in trouble, and work together.

"If this isn't done, everything that makes men different from beasts will soon be no more."

"He's right. One of us, alone, is helpless," the Reader said. "It is only in the Toon that there is strength. He wants to organize a Toon of all Toons."

"That's about it. We are beginning to make helicopters, like the one Loudons and I came in. We'll furnish your community with one or more of them. We can give you a radio, so that you can communicate with other communities. We can give you rifles and machine guns and ammunition, to fight the--the Scowrers, did you call them? And we can give you atomic engines, so that you can build machines for yourselves."

"Some of our people,—Alex Barrett here, the gunsmith, and Stan Markovitch, the distiller, and Harrison Grant, the iron-worker—get their living by making things. How'd they make out, after your machines came in here?" Verner Hughes asked.

"We've thought of that. We had that problem with other groups we've helped," Loudons said. "In some communities, everybody owns everything in common and so we don't have much of a problem. Is that the way you do it, here?"

"Well, no. If a man makes a thing, or digs it out of the ruins, or catches it in the woods, it's his."

"Then we'll work out some way. Give the machines to the people who are already in a trade, or something like that. We'll have to talk it over with you and with the people concerned."

"How is it you took so long finding us?" Alex Barrett asked. "It's been two hundred or so years since the Wars."

"Alex! You see but you do not observe!" The Toon Leader rebuked. "These people have their flying machines,
which are highly complicated mechanisms. They would have to make tools and machines to make them, and tools and machines to make those tools and machines. They would have to find materials, often going in search of them. The marvel is not that they took so long, but that they did it so quickly."

"That's right," Altamont said. "Originally, Fort Ridgeway was a military research and development center. As the country became disorganized, the Government set this project up to develop ways of improvising power and transportation and communication methods and extracting raw materials. If they'd had a little more time, they might have saved the country.

"As it was, they were able to keep themselves alive, and keep something like civilization going at the Fort, while the whole country was breaking apart around them.

"Then, when the rockets stopped falling, they started to rebuild. Fortunately, more than half the technicians at the Fort were women, so there was no question of them dying out.

"But it's only been in the last twenty years that we've been able to make nuclear-electric engines, and this is the first time any of us have gotten east of the Mississippi."

"How did your group manage to survive?" Loudons asked. "You call it the Toon. I suppose that's what the word platoon has become, with time. You were, originally, a military platoon?"

"Pla-toon!" the white-bearded man said. "Of all the unpardonable stupidities! Of course that's what it was. And the title, Tenant, was originally lieu-tenant. I know that, though we have dropped all use of the first part of the word. But that should have led me, if I had used my wits, to deduce platoon from toon."

The Tenant shook his head in dismay at his stupidity and Loudons found himself forced to say, "One syllable like that could have come from many words."

IV

The Tenant smiled at Loudons and said, "Your courtesy does not excuse our stupidity. We know our history and we should have identified the word accurately.

"Yes, we were originally a ... a pla-toon of soldiers, two hundred years ago, at the time when the Wars ended. The old Toon, and the First Tenant, were guarding POWs, and there, sir,--to Loudons--"is a word we cannot trace. We have no idea what they were. In any event, the pows were all killed by a big bomb, and the First Tenant, Lieutenant Gilbert Dunbar, took his platoon and started to march to DeeCee, where the government was.

"But there was no government any more.

"They fought with people along the way. When they needed food, or ammunition, or animals to pull their wagons, they took them, and killed those who tried to prevent them. Other people joined the toon, and when they found women they wanted, they took them.

"They did all sorts of things that would have been crimes if there had been any law, but since there was no law, it was obvious that they could be no crime.

"The First Ten--Lieutenant--kept his men together, because he had The Books. Each evening, at the end of each day's march, he read to his men out of them."

Altamont knew without looking at his associate that Loudons would be inconspicuously jotting down notes. The last was an item the sociologist would be sure to record: the white-bearded Tenant had pronounced that reference to a written testament in capital letters.

The story was continuing....

"... finally, they came here. There had been a town here, but it had been burned and destroyed, and there were people camping in the ruins.

"Some of them fought and were killed, others came in and joined the platoon.

"At first, they built shelters around this building and made this their fort. Then they cleared away the ruins, and built new houses. When the cartridges for the rifles began to get scarce, they began to make gunpowder, and new rifles, like these we are using now, to shoot without cartridges.

"Lieutenant Dunbar did this out of his own knowledge because there is nothing in The Books about making gunpowder. The guns in The Books are rifles and shotguns and revolvers and airguns. Except for the airguns, which we haven't been able to make, these all shot cartridges.

"As with your people, we did not die out because we too had women. Neither did we increase greatly--too many died or were killed young. But several times we've had to tear down the wall and rebuild it, to make room inside for more houses. And we've been clearing out a little more land for the fields each year.

"We still read and follow the teachings of The Books; we have made laws for ourselves out of them."

There was a silence during which Altamont felt himself to be the focus of attention; not obtrusively, but, nonetheless, insistently. However, this was Loudon's field and Altamont preferred not to speak.

"And we are waiting for the Slain and Risen One," Tenant Jones added, and there was no doubt that he was looking at Altamont intently. "It is impossible that He will not, sooner or later, deduce the existence of this
community, if He has not done so already."

Again the silence and lack of movement, broken by Loudons this time, when he picked up the candle to re-lit his cigar. Mentally, Altamont thanked his partner.

"Well, sir," the Toon Leader changed the subject abruptly, "enough of this talk about the past. If I understand rightly, it is the future in which you gentlemen are interested." He pushed back the cuff of his hunting shirt and looked at an old and worn wrist watch. "Eleven hundred: we'll have lunch shortly.

"This afternoon, you will meet the other people of the Toon, and this evening, at eighteen hundred, we'll have a mess together. Then, when we have everyone together, we can talk over your offer to help us, and decide what it is that you can give us that we can use."

"You spoke, a while ago, of what you could do for us, in return," Altamont said. He knew that now he would have to be the one to stress their original mission: Loudons would probably be so fascinated by this society that the sociologist might never remember the primary reason for coming to Pittsburgh.

"There's one thing you can do, no further away than tomorrow, if you're willing."

He had no time to wonder at the interchange of glances around the table before the Toon Leader said, "And that is--?"

"In Pittsburgh, somewhere, there is an underground crypt, full of books. Not printed and bound books, but spools of microfilm. Do you know what that is?"

The men of the Toon shook their heads. Altamont continued:

"They are spools on which strips of films are wound and on which pictures have been taken of books, page by page. We can make other, larger pictures from them, big enough to be read--"

"Oh, photographs, which you can enlarge. I can understand that. You mean, you can make many copies of them?"

"That's right. And you shall have copies, as soon as we can take the originals back to Fort Ridgeway, where we have the equipment for enlarging them. But while we have information which will help us to find the crypt where the books are, we will need help in getting it open."

"Of course! This is wonderful. Copies of The Books!" the Reader exclaimed. "We thought that we had the only one left in the world!"

"Not just The Books, Stamford, other books," the Toon Leader told him. "The books mentioned in The Books. But of course we will help you. You have a map to show where they are?"

"Not a map, just some information. But we can work out the location of the crypt."

"A ritual," Stamford Rawson said happily. "Of course!"

V

They lunched together at the house of Toon Sarge Hughes with the Toon Leader and the Reader and five or six of the leaders of the community. The food was plentiful, but Altamont found himself wishing that the first book they found in the Carnegie Library crypt would be a cook-book.

In the afternoon, he and Loudons separated.

Loudons attached himself to the Tenant, the Reader and an old woman, Irene Klein, who was almost a hundred years old and was the repository and arbiter of most of the community's oral legends.

Altamont, on the other hand, started with Alex Barrett, the gunsmith, and Mordecai Ricci, the miller, to inspect the gunshop and the grist mill. They were later joined by a half dozen more of the village craftsmen and so also visited the forge and foundry, the sawmill and the wagon shop. Altamont additionally looked at the flume, a rough structure of logs lined with sheet aluminum; and at the nitriary, a shed-roofed pit in which potassium nitrate was extracted from the community's animal refuse.

But he reversed matters when it came to visiting the powder mill on the island: he became the host and took them by helicopter to the island and then for a trip up the river.

The guests were a badly-scared lot, for the first few minutes, as they watched the ground receding under them through the transparent plastic nose. Then, when nothing serious seemed to be happening, exhilaration took the place of fear. By the time they set down on the tip of the island, the eight men were confirmed aviation enthusiasts.

The trip up-river was an even bigger success, the high point coming when Altamont set his controls for Hover, pointed out a snarl of driftwood in the stream, and allowed his passengers to fire one of the machine-guns at it. The lead balls of their own black-powder rifles would have plunked into the water-logged wood without visible effect. The copper-jacketed machine-gun bullets ripped it to splinters.

They returned for a final visit to the distillery awed by what they had seen.

VI

"Monty, I don't know what the devil to make of this crowd," Loudons said, that evening, after the feast, when they had entered the helicopter and were preparing to retire.
"We've run into some weird communities--that lot down in New Mexico who live in the church and claim that they have a divine mission to redeem the world by prayer, fasting, and flagellation.

"Or those yogis in Los Angeles--" Altamont interrupted. He had good reason to remember them.

"That's understandable," Loudons said, "after what their ancestors went through in the last war. And so are the others, in their own way.

"But this crowd here!" Loudons put down his cigar and began chewing on his mustache, a sure sign that he was more than puzzled: he was a very worried man.

Altamont respected his partner's abilities in this area. However, he also knew that the best way to get his friend to work any problem was to have him do it in conversation.

"What has you stopped, Jim?"

"Number of things, Monty. They're hard to explain because--" the sociologist shrugged, winced a little as the gesture pushed his leg down on the edge of his bunk--"well, let me just mention them.

"These people are the descendants of an old United States Army platoon, yet they have a fully-developed religion centered on a slain and resurrected god.

"Now, Monty, with all due respect to the old US Army, that just doesn't make sense! Normally, it would take thousands of years for a slain-god religion to develop, and then only in a special situation, from the field-fertility magic of primitive agriculturists.

"Well, you saw those people's fields from the air. Some members of that old platoon were men who knew the latest methods of scientific farming. They didn't need naive fairy tales about the planting and germination of seed."

"Sure this religion isn't just a variant of Christianity?"

"Absolutely not!

"In the first place, these Sacred Books cannot be the Bible--you heard Tenant Jones say that they mentioned firearms that used cartridges. That means they can't be older than 1860 at the earliest.

"And, in the second place, this slain god wasn't crucified, or put to death by any form of execution: he perished, together with his enemy, in combat, and both god and devil were later resurrected."

Loudons picked up his cigar again. "By the way, the Enemy is supposed to be the master-mind back of these cannibal savages in the woods and also in the ruins."

"Did you get a look at these Sacred Books, or find out what they might be?"

Loudons shook his head disgustedly. "Every time I brought up the question, they evaded me. The Tenant sent the Reader out to bring in this old lady, Irene Klein--she was a perfect gold-mine of information about the history and traditions of the platoon, by the way--and then he sent the Reader out on some other errand, undoubtedly to pass the word around not to talk to us about their religion."

"I don't get that," Altamont said. "They showed me everything--their gunshop, their powder mill, their defenses, everything."

He smoked in silence for a moment, then added, in an apologetic tone, "Jim, I'm sure you've thought of this: the slain god couldn't be the original platoon commander, could he?"

"I've thought of it, and he isn't, Monty.

"No, definitely not, though they have the greatest respect for his memory--decorate his grave regularly, drink toasts to him, and so on. But he hasn't been deified. They got the idea for this god of theirs out of the Sacred Books."

Loudons put the cigar down again and returned to chewing his mustache. "Monty, this has me worried like the devil:

"I believe that they suspect that you are the Slain and Risen One!"

Altamont considered the idea, then nodded slowly. "Could be, at that. I know the Tenant came up to me, very respectfully, and said, 'I hope you don't think, sir, that I was presumptuous in trying to display my humble deductive abilities to you.'"

"What did you say?" Loudons demanded rather sharply.

"Told him certainly not, that he'd used a good, quick method of demonstrating that he and his people weren't like those mindless subhumans in the woods."

"That was all right," Loudons approved, but then his worries returned. "I don't know how we're going to handle this--"

"Jim, how about that pows business? Is there something there?"

"Monty!" Loudons voice was drily chiding as he took a pad of paper and scribbled briefly. "Take a look and figure for yourself."

Altamont looked at the paper. Loudons had simply printed the first three letters of the word in capitals and separated each letter with a period. "Ouch! Yes, of course, that's what an infantry platoon would be guarding."
"Go ahead, Jim, this is your end of our business. I'll stay out of it and, especially, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I don't think you'll be able to," Loudons said soberly. "As things stand now, they only suspect that you are their deity.

"And that means this: we're on trial here!"

"We have been in spots like this before, Jim," Altamont reminded his friend.

"Not like this, Monty, and let me explain."

"I get the impression here that logic, not faith, is the supreme religious virtue. And get this, Monty, because it's something practically unheard of: skepticism is a religious obligation, not a sin!

"I wish I knew...."

VII

Tenant Mycroft Jones, Reader Stamford Rawson, Toon Sarge Verner Hughes, and his son, Murray Hughes, sat around the bare-topped table in the room on the second floor of the Aitch-Cue House. A lighted candle flickered in the cool breeze that came in through the open window, throwing their shadows back and forth on the walls.

"Pass the tantalus, Murray," the Tenant said, and the youngest of the four handed the corncob-corked bottle to the eldest. Tenant Jones filled his cup and then sat staring at it, while Verner Hughes thrust his pipe into the toe of the moccasin and filled it. Finally, the Tenant drank about half the clear, wild-plum brandy.

"Gentlemen, I am baffled," he confessed. "We have three alternate possibilities here and we dare not disregard any of them.

"Either this man who calls himself Altamont is truly He, or his is merely what we are asked to believe, one of a community of men like ours, with more of the old knowledge than we possess."

"You know my views," Verner Hughes said. "I cannot believe that He was more than a man, as we are. A great, a good, a wise man, but a man and mortal."

"Let's not go into that, now." The Reader emptied his cup and took the bottle, filling it again. "You know my views, too. I hold that He is no longer upon earth in the flesh, but lives in the spirit and is only with us in the spirit.

"But you said there were three possibilities, none of which can be eliminated. What was your third possibility, Tenant?"

"That they are creatures of the Enemy, perhaps that one or the other of them is the Enemy."

Reader Rawson, lifting his cup to his lips, almost strangled. The Hugheses, father and son stared at Tenant Jones in horror.

"The Enemy--with such weapons and resources!" Murray Hughes gasped. Then he emptied his cup and refilled it. "No! I can't believe that: he would have struck before this and wiped us all out!"

"Not necessarily, Murray," the Tenant replied. "Until he became convinced that his agents, the Scowrers, could do nothing against us, he would bide his time. He sits motionless, like a spider, at the center of the web; he does little himself; his agents are numerous.

"Or, perhaps, he wishes to recruit us into this hellish organization."

"It is a possibility," the Reader admitted, "and one which we can neither accept or reject safely. And we must learn the truth as soon as possible. If this man is really He, we must not spurn Him on mere suspicion. If he is a man, come to help us, we must accept his help; if he is speaking the truth, the people who sent him could do wonders for us, and the greatest wonder would be to make us again a part of a civilized community.

"And if he is the Enemy...." Rawson left the sentence unfinished, but his face was grim.

"But if he is really He," Murray said, a little diffidently, for he was not yet accustomed to being included in the council of the elders, "I think we are on trial."

"What do you mean, son? Oh, I see. Of course, I don't believe that he is, but that's mere doubt, not negative certainty. However, if I'm wrong, if this man is truly He, we are worthy of him, we will penetrate his disguise."

"A very pretty problem, gentlemen," the Tenant said, smacking his lips over his brandy, "for all that it may be a deadly serious one for us. There is, of course, nothing we can do tonight. But, tomorrow, we have promised to help our visitors, whoever they may be, in searching for this crypt in the city.

"Murray, you were to be in charge of the detail that was to accompany them. Carry on as arranged, and say nothing of our suspicions, but advise your men to keep a sharp watch on the strangers, that they may learn all they can from them.

"Stamford, you and Verner and I will go along. We should, if we have any wits at all, observe something."

VIII

"Listen to this infernal thing!" Altamont raged. "'Wielding a gold-plated spade handled with oak from an original rafter of the Congressional Library, at three-fifteen one afternoon last week--' One afternoon last week!" He cursed luridly. "Why couldn't that blasted magazine say what afternoon? I've gone over a lot of twentieth century copies of that magazine and that expression was a regular cliche with them."
Loudons looked over his shoulder at the photostated magazine page.

"Well, we know it was between June thirteen and nineteen, inclusive," he said. "And there's a picture of the university president, complete with gold-plated spade, breaking ground. Call it Wednesday, the sixteenth. Over there's the tip of the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning, about a hundred yards away. There are so many inexactitudes, that one'll probably cancel out the other."

"That's so, and it's also pretty futile getting angry at somebody who's been dead two hundred years, but why couldn't they say Wednesday, or Monday, or Saturday, or whatever?"

Monty checked back in the astronomical handbook, and the photostated pages of the old almanac, then looked over his calculations. "All right, here is the angle of the shadow, and the compass-bearing.

"I had a look, yesterday, when I was taking the local citizenry on that junket. The old baseball diamond at Forbes Field is plainly visible, and I located the ruins of the Cathedral of Learning from that.

"Here's the above-sea-level altitude of the top of the tower. After you've landed us, go up to this altitude--use the barometric altimeter, not the radar--and hold position."

Loudons leaned forward from the desk to the contraption Altamont had rigged up in the nose of the helicopter; one of the telescope-sighted hunting rifles clamped in a vise, with a compass and a spirit-level under it.

"Rifle's pointing downward at the correct angle now?" he asked. "Good. Then all I have to do is to hold the helicopter steady, keep it at the right altitude, level and pointed in the right direction, and watch through the sight while you move the flag around, and direct you by radio."

"Simple, if I had been born quintuplets!"

"Mr. Altamont! Doctor Loudons!" a voice outside the helicopter called. "Are you ready for us now?"

Altamont went to the open door and looked out. The old Toon Leader, the Reader, Toon Sarge Hughes, his son and four young men in buckskins with slung rifles were standing outside.

"I have decided," the Tenant said, "that Mr. Rawson and Sarge Hughes and I would be of more help than an equal number of young men. We may not be as active, but we do know the old ruins better, especially the paths and hiding places of the Scowrers. These four young men you probably met last evening, but it will do no harm to introduce them again.

"Birdy Edwards; Sholto Jiminez; Jefferson Burns; Murdo Olsen."

"Very pleased, Tenant, gentlemen. I met all of you young men last evening and I remember you," Altamont said. "Now, if you'll crowd in here, I'll explain what we're going to try to do."

He showed them the old picture. "You see where the shadow of a tall building falls?" he asked. "We know the height and location of this building. Doctor Loudons will hold this helicopter at exactly the position of the top of the building and aim through the sights of the rifle, there. One of you will have this flag in his hand, and will move it back and forth. Doctor Loudons will tell us when the flag is in sight of the rifle."

"He'll need a good pair of lungs to do that," Verner Hughes commented.

"We'll use the radio. A portable set on the ground, and the helicopter's radio set," Altamont said.

To his surprise, he was met with looks of incomprehension. He had not supposed that these people would have lost all memory of radio communication.

"Why, that's wonderful!" the Reader exclaimed, when the explanation was concluded. "You can talk directly. How much better than just sending a telegram!"

"But, finding the crypt by the shadow, that's exactly like the--" Murray Hughes began, then stopped short. Immediately, he began talking about the rifle that was to be used as a surveying transit, comparing it with the ones in the big first-floor room at the Aitch-Cue House.

Locating the point where the shadow of the old Cathedral of Learning had fallen proved easier than either Altamont or Loudons had expected. The towering building was now a tumbled mass of slagged rubble, but it was quite possible to determine its original center, and with the old data from the excellent reference library at Fort Ridgeway, its height above sea level was known. After a little jockeying, the helicopter came to a hovering stop, and the slanting barrel of the rifle in the vise pointed downward along the line of the shadow that had been cast on that afternoon in June, 1993.

The cross-hairs of the scope sight centered almost exactly on the spot Altamont had estimated on the map.

Guiding himself by peering through the rifle-sight, Loudons brought the helicopter slanting down to land on the sheet of fused glass that had once been a grassy campus.

"Well, this is probably it," Altamont said. "We didn't have to bother fussing around with that flag after all. That hump over there looks as though it had been a small building, and there's nothing corresponding to it on the city map. That may be the bunker over the stair-head to the crypt."

They began unloading equipment--a small, portable nuclear-electric conversion unit, a powerful solenoid-hammer, crowbars and intrenching tools, tins of blasting plastic. They took out the two hunting rifles and the auto-
carbines, and Altamont showed the young men of Murray Hughes' detail how to use them.

"If you will pardon me, sir," the Tenant said to Altamont, "I think it would be a good idea if your companion went up in the flying machine and circled over us, to keep watch for the Scowrers. There are quite a few of them, particularly farther up the rivers, to the east, where the damage was not so great and they can find cellars and shelters and buildings to live in."

"Good idea. That way, we won't have to put out guards," Altamont said. "From the looks of this, we'll need every body to help dig into that thing. Hand out one of the portable radios, Jim and go up to about a thousand feet. If you see anything suspicious, give us a yell, then spray it with bullets, and find out what it is afterward."

They waited until the helicopter had climbed to position and was circling above, and then turned their attention to the place where the sheet of fused earth and stone bulged upward. It must have been almost ground-zero of one of the hydrogen-bombs: the wreckage of the Cathedral of Learning had fallen predominantly to the north, and the Carnegie Library was tumbled to the east.

"I think the entrance would be on this side, toward the Library," Altamont said. "Let's try it, to begin with."

He used the solenoid-hammer, slowly pounding a hole in the glaze, and placed a small charge of the plastic explosive. Chunks of the lava-like stuff pelted down between the little mound and the huge one of the old library, blowing a hole six feet in diameter and the two and a half feet deep, revealing concrete bonded with crushed steel-mill slag.

"We missed the door," Altamont said. "That means we'll have to tunnel in through who knows how much concrete. Well...."

He used a second and larger charge, after digging a hole a foot deep. When he and his helpers came up to look, they found a large mass of concrete blown out, and solid steel behind it. Altamont cut two more holes, one on either side of the blown-out place, and fired a charge in each of them, bringing down more concrete.

He found he hadn't missed the door after all. It had merely been concreted over.

A few more shots cleared it, and after some work, they got it open. There was a room inside, concrete-floorered and entirely empty. Altamont stood in the doorway and inspected the interior with his flashlight; he heard somebody behind him say something about a most peculiar sort of dark-lantern.

Across the small room, on the opposite wall, was a bronze plaque.

The plaque carried quite a lengthy inscription, including the names of all the persons and institutions participating in the microfilm project. The History Department at the Fort would be interested in that, but the only thing that interested Altamont was the statement that the floor had been laid over the trapdoor leading to the vault where the microfilms were stored. He went outside to the radio.

"Hello, Jim. We're inside, but the films were stored in an underground vault, and so we have to tear up a concrete floor," he said. "Go back to the village and gather up all the men you can carry. I don't want to use explosives inside. The interior of the crypt oughtn't to be damaged. Besides, I don't know what a blast in there might do to the film, and I don't want to take any chances."

"No, of course not. How thick do you think the floor is?"

"Haven't the least idea. Plenty thick, I would guess. Those films would have to be well-buried, to shield them from radioactivity. We can expect that it will take some time."

"All right. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The helicopter turned and went windmilling away, over what had been the Golden Triangle, down the Ohio. Altamont went back to the little concrete bunker and sat down, lighting his pipe. Murray Hughes and his four riflemen spread out, one circling around the glazed butte that had been the Cathedral of Learning, another climbing to the top of the old Library, and the others taking positions to the south and east.

Altamont sat in silence, smoking his pipe and trying to form some conception of the wealth under that concrete floor.

It was no use.

Jim Loudons probably understood a little more clearly what those books would mean to the world of today, and what they could do toward shaping the world of the future.

There was a library at Fort Ridgeway, and it was an excellent one ... for its purpose. In 1996, when the rockets had come crashing down, it had contained the cream of the world's technical knowledge--and very little else. There was only a little fiction, a few books of ideas, just enough to give the survivors a tantalizing glimpse of the world of their fathers.

But now....

* * * * *

A rifle banged to the south and east, and banged again. Either Murray Hughes or Birdy Edwards: it was one of the two hunting rifles from the helicopter.
On the heels of the reports, they heard a voice shouting, "Scowrers! A lot of them, coming from up the river!"

A moment later, there was a light whip-crack of one of the muzzleloaders, from the top of the old Carnegie Library, and Altamont could see a wisp of grey-white smoke drifting away from where it had been fired.

Altamont jumped to his feet and raced for the radio, picking it up and bring it to the bunker.

Tenant Jones, old Reader Rawson, and Verner Hughes had caught up their rifles. The Tenant was shouting. "Come on in! Everybody, come on in!"

The boy on top of the library began scrambling down. Another came running from the direction of the half-demolished Cathedral of Learning, a third from the baseball field that had served as Altamont's point of reference the afternoon before.

The fourth, Murray Hughes, was running in from the ruins of the old Carnegie Tech buildings, and Birdy Edwards sped up the main road from Schenley Park. Once, twice, as he ran, Murray Hughes paused, turned, and fired behind him.

Then his pursuers came into sight!

They ran erect, they wore a few rags of skin garments, and they carried spears and hatchets and clubs, so they were probably classifiable as men. But their hair was long and unkempt, and their bodies were almost black with dirt and from the sun. A few of them were yelling, but most of them ran silently. They ran more swiftly than the boy they were pursuing: the distance between them narrowed every moment. There were at least fifty of them.

Verner Hughes' rifle barked, one of them dropped. As coolly as though he were shooting squirrels instead of his son's pursuers, he dropped the butt of the rifle to the ground, poured a charge of powder, patched a ball and rammed it home, replaced the ramrod. Tenant Jones fired then, and Birdy Edwards joined them, beginning to shoot with the telescope-sighted rifle.

The young man who had been north of the Cathedral of Learning had one of the auto-carbines; luckily, Altamont had providently set the control for semi-auto before giving it to him. He dropped to one knee and began to empty the clip, shooting slowly and deliberately, picking off the runners who were in the lead.

The boy who had started to climb down off the Library halted, fired his flintlock, and began reloading it.

Altamont, sitting down and propping his elbows on his knees, took both hands to the automatic which was his only weapon, emptying the magazine and replacing it. The last three savages he shot in the back: they had had enough and were running for their lives.

So far, everybody was safe. The boy in the Library came down through a place where the wall had fallen. Murray Hughes stopped running and came slowly toward the bunker, putting a fresh clip into his rifle. The others came drifting in.

* * * * *

"Altamont, calling Loudons," the scientist from Fort Ridgeway was saying into the radio. "Monty to Jim: can you hear me?"

Silence.

"We'd better get ready for another attack," Birdy Edwards said. "There's another gang coming from down that way. I never saw so many Scowrers!"

"Maybe there's a reason, Birdy," Tenant Jones said. "The Enemy is after big game, this time."

"Jim, where the devil are you?" Altamont fairly yelled into the radio; and as he did, he knew the answer. Loudons was in the village, away from the helicopter, gathering tools and workers.

Nothing to do but keep on trying!

"Here they come!" Reader Rawson warned.

"How far can these rifles be depended on?" Birdy Edwards wanted to know.

Altamont straightened, saw the second band of savages approaching about four hundred yards away.

"Start shooting now," he said. "Aim for the upper part of their bodies."

The two auto-loading rifles began to crack. After the first few shots, the savages took cover. Evidently they understood the capabilities and limitations of the villagers' flintlocks, but this was a terrifying surprise to them.

"Jim!"--Altamont was almost praying into the radio--"Come in, Jim!"

"What is it, Monty? I was outside."

Altamont told him.

"Those fellows you had up with you yesterday, think they could be trusted to handle the guns? A couple of them are here with me," Loudons inquired.

"Take a chance on it! It won't cost anything but my life, and that's not worth much at the present."

"All right, hold on. We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Loudons is bringing the helicopter," Altamont told the others. "All we have to do is to hold on, here, until he comes."
A naked savage raised his head from behind what might, two hundred years ago, have been a cement park-
bench and he was only a hundred yards away. Reader Rawson promptly killed him and began reloading.

"I think you're right, Tenant," he said. "The Scowers have never attacked in bands like this before. They must
have a powerful reason and I can think of only one."

"That's what I'm beginning to think, too," Verner Hughes agreed. "At least, we've eliminated the third of your
possibilities, Tenant. And I think probably the second, as well."

Altamont wondered what they were double-talking about. There wasn't any particular mystery about the mass
attack of the wild men to him.

Debased as they were, they still possessed speech and the ability to transmit experiences. No matter how
beclouded in superstition, they still remembered that aircraft dropped bombs, and bombs killed people, and where
people had been killed, they would find fresh meat. They had seen the helicopter circling about, and had heard the
blasting: everyone in the area had been drawn to the scene as soon as Loudons had gone down the river.

But they seemed to have forgotten that aircraft carried guns, although they did spring to their feet and start to
run at the return of the helicopter.

``However, most of them did not run far."

IX

Altamont and Loudons shook hands many times in front of the Aitch-Cue House, and listened to many good
wishes, and repeated their promise to return. Most of the microfilmed books were to be stored in the old church.
They were taking with them only the catalogue and a few of the most important works. Finally, they entered the
helicopter. The crowd shouted farewell as they rose.

Altamont, at the controls, waited until they had gained five thousand feet, then turned on a compass-course for
Colony Three.

"I can't wait until we're in radio range of the Fort, Jim. This is one report that I really want to make," he said.

"Of all the wonderful luck!" he went on. "And I don't know which is the more important: finding those books,
or finding those people. In a few years, when we can get them supplied with modern equipment and instructed in its
use--"

"What's the matter, Jim? You should be even more excited than I am."

"I'm not very happy about this, Monty," Loudons confessed. "I keep thinking about what's going to happen to
them."

"Why, nothing's going to happen to them. They're going to be given the means of producing more food,
keeping more of them alive, giving them more leisure to develop themselves in--"

"Monty, I saw the Sacred Books."

"The deuce! What were they?"

"It. One volume. A collection of works. We have it at the Fort and I've read it. How I ever missed all those
clues--"

"You see, Monty, what I'm worried about is what's going to happen to those people when they find out that
we're not really Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson...."
He tried to speak, and must have stirred; the corpsman's voice sharpened.
"Major, I think he's part conscious. Mebbe I better give him 'nother shot."
"Yes, yes; by all means, sergeant."

Something jabbed Allan Hartley in the back of the neck. Soft billows of oblivion closed in upon him, and all that remained to him was a tiny spark of awareness, glowing alone and lost in a great darkness.

* * * * *

The Spark grew brighter. He was more than a something that merely knew that it existed. He was a man, and he had a name, and a military rank, and memories. Memories of the searing blue-green flash, and of what he had been doing outside the shelter the moment before, and memories of the month-long siege, and of the retreat from the north, and memories of the days before the War, back to the time when he had been little Allan Hartley, a schoolboy, the son of a successful lawyer, in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

His mother he could not remember; there was only a vague impression of the house full of people who had tried to comfort him for something he could not understand. But he remembered the old German woman who had kept house for his father, afterward, and he remembered his bedroom, with its chintz-covered chairs, and the warm-colored patch quilt on the old cherry bed, and the tan curtains at the windows, edged with dusky red, and the morning sun shining through them. He could almost see them, now.

He blinked. He could see them!

* * * * *

For a long time, he lay staring at them unbelievingly, and then he deliberately closed his eyes and counted ten seconds, and as he counted, terror gripped him. He was afraid to open them again, lest he find himself blind, or gazing at the filth and wreckage of a blasted city, but when he reached ten, he forced himself to look, and gave a sigh of relief. The sunlit curtains and the sun-gilded mist outside were still there.

He reached out to check one sense against another, feeling the rough monk's cloth and the edging of maroon silk thread. They were tangible as well as visible. Then he saw that the back of his hand was unscarred. There should have been a scar, souvenir of a rough-and-tumble brawl of his cub reporter days. He examined both hands closely. An instant later, he had sat up in bed and thrown off the covers, partially removing his pajamas and inspecting as much of his body as was visible.

It was the smooth body of a little boy.

That was ridiculous. He was a man of forty-three; an army officer, a chemist, once a best-selling novelist. He had been married, and divorced ten years ago. He looked again at his body. It was only twelve years old. Fourteen, at the very oldest. His eyes swept the room, wide with wonder. Every detail was familiar: the flower-splashed chair covers; the table that served as desk and catch-all for his possessions; the dresser, with its mirror stuck full of pictures of aircraft. It was the bedroom of his childhood home. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. They were six inches too short to reach the floor.

For an instant, the room spun dizzily; and he was in the grip of utter panic, all confidence in the evidence of his senses lost. Was he insane? Or delirious? Or had the bomb really killed him; was this what death was like? What was that thing, about "ye become as little children"? He started to laugh, and his juvenile larynx made giggling sounds. They seemed funny, too, and aggravated his mirth. For a little while, he was on the edge of hysteria and then, when he managed to control his laughter, he felt calmer. If he were dead, then he must be a discarnate entity, and would be able to penetrate matter. To his relief, he was unable to push his hand through the bed. So he was alive; he was also fully awake, and, he hoped, rational. He rose to his feet and prowled about the room, taking stock of its contents.

There was no calendar in sight, and he could find no newspapers or dated periodicals, but he knew that it was prior to July 18, 1946. On that day, his fourteenth birthday, his father had given him a light .22 rifle, and it had been hung on a pair of rustic forks on the wall. It was not there now, nor ever had been. On the table, he saw a boys' book of military aircraft, with a clean, new dustjacket; the flyleaf was inscribed: To Allan Hartley, from his father, on his thirteenth birthday, 7/18 '45. Glancing out the window at the foliage on the trees, he estimated the date at late July or early August, 1945; that would make him just thirteen.

His clothes were draped on a chair beside the bed. Stripping off his pajamas, he donned shorts, then sat down and picked up a pair of lemon-colored socks, which he regarded with disfavor. As he pulled one on, a church bell began to clang. St. Boniface, up on the hill, ringing for early Mass; so this was Sunday. He paused, the second sock in his hand.

There was no question that his present environment was actual. Yet, on the other hand, he possessed a set of memories completely at variance with it. Now, suppose, since his environment were not an illusion, everything else were? Suppose all these troublesome memories were no more than a dream? Why, he was just little Allan Hartley, safe in his room on a Sunday morning, badly scared by a nightmare! Too much science fiction, Allan; too many
That was a wonderfully comforting thought, and he hugged it to him contentedly. It lasted all the while he was buttoning up his shirt and pulling on his pants, but when he reached for his shoes, it evaporated. Ever since he had wakened, he realized, he had been occupied with thoughts utterly incomprehensible to any thirteen-year-old; even thinking in words that would have been so much Sanscrit to himself at thirteen. He shook his head regretfully. The just-a-dream hypothesis went by the deep six.

He picked up the second shoe and glared at it as though it were responsible for his predicament. He was going to have to be careful. An unexpected display of adult characteristics might give rise to some questions he would find hard to answer credibly. Fortunately, he was an only child; there would be no brothers or sisters to trip him up. Old Mrs. Stauber, the housekeeper, wouldn't be much of a problem; even in his normal childhood, he had bulked like an intellectual giant in comparison to her. But his father--

Now, there the going would be tough. He knew that shrewd attorney's mind, whetted keen on a generation of lying and reluctant witnesses. Sooner or later, he would forget for an instant and betray himself. Then he smiled, remembering the books he had discovered, in his late 'teens, on his father's shelves and recalling the character of the openminded agnostic lawyer. If he could only avoid the inevitable unmasking until he had a plausible explanatory theory.

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Blake Hartley was leaving the bathroom as Allan Hartley opened his door and stepped into the hall. The lawyer was bare-armed and in slippers; at forty-eight, there was only a faint powdering of gray in his dark hair, and not a gray thread in his clipped mustache. The old Merry Widower, himself, Allan thought, grinning as he remembered the white-haired but still vigorous man from whom he'd parted at the outbreak of the War.

"'Morning, Dad," he greeted.

"'Morning, son. You're up early. Going to Sunday school?"

Now there was the advantage of a father who'd cut his first intellectual tooth on Tom Paine and Bob Ingersoll; attendance at divine services was on a strictly voluntary basis.

"Why, I don't think so; I want to do some reading, this morning."

"That's always a good thing to do," Blake Hartley approved. "After breakfast, suppose you take a walk down to the station and get me a Times." He dug in his trouser pocket and came out with a half dollar. "Get anything you want for yourself, while you're at it."

Allan thanked his father and pocketed the coin.

"Mrs. Stauber'll still be at Mass," he suggested. "Say I get the paper now; breakfast won't be ready till she gets here."

"Good idea." Blake Hartley nodded, pleased. "You'll have three-quarters of an hour, at least."

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So far, he congratulated himself, everything had gone smoothly. Finishing his toilet, he went downstairs and onto the street, turning left at Brandon to Campbell, and left again in the direction of the station. Before he reached the underpass, a dozen half-forgotten memories had revived. Here was a house that would, in a few years, be gutted by fire. Here were four dwellings standing where he had last seen a five-story apartment building. A gasoline station and a weed-grown lot would shortly be replaced by a supermarket. The environs of the station itself were a complete puzzle to him, until he oriented himself.

He bought a New York Times, glancing first of all at the date line. Sunday, August 5, 1945; he'd estimated pretty closely. The battle of Okinawa had been won. The Potsdam Conference had just ended. There were still pictures of the B-25 crash against the Empire State Building, a week ago Saturday. And Japan was still being pounded by bombs from the air and shells from off-shore naval guns. Why, tomorrow, Hiroshima was due for the Big Job! It amused him to reflect that he was probably the only person in Williamsport who knew that.

On the way home, a boy, sitting on the top step of a front porch, hailed him. Allan replied cordially, trying to remember who it was. Of course; Larry Morton! He and Allan had been buddies. They probably had been swimming, or playing Commandos and Germans, the afternoon before. Larry had gone to Cornell the same year that Allan had gone to Penn State; they had both graduated in 1954. Larry had gotten into some Government bureau, and then he had married a Pittsburgh girl, and had become twelfth vice-president of her father's firm. He had been killed, in 1968, in a plane crash.

"You gonna Sunday school?" Larry asked, mercifully unaware of the fate Allan foresaw for him.

"Why, no. I have some things I want to do at home." He'd have to watch himself. Larry would spot a difference quicker than any adult. "Heck with it," he added.

"Golly, I wisht I c'ld stay home from Sunday school whenever I wanted to," Larry envied. "How about us goin' swimmin', at the Canoe Club, 'safter?"
Allan thought fast. "Gee, I wisht I c‘ld," he replied, lowering his grammatical sights. "I gotta stay home, ‘sfter. We’re expectin’ comp’n’y; coupla aunts of mine. Dad wants me to stay home when they come."

That went over all right. Anybody knew that there was no rational accounting for the vagaries of the adult mind, and no appeal from adult demands. The prospect of company at the Hartley home would keep Larry away, that afternoon. He showed his disappointment.

"Aw, jeppers creepers!" he blasphemed euphemistically.

"Mebbe t’morrow," Allan said. "If I c’n make it. I gotta go, now; ain’t had breakfast yet." He scuffed his feet boyishly, exchanged so-longs with his friend, and continued homeward.

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As he had hoped, the Sunday paper kept his father occupied at breakfast, to the exclusion of any dangerous table talk. Blake Hartley was still deep in the financial section when Allan left the table and went to the library. There should be two books there to which he wanted badly to refer. For a while, he was afraid that his father had not acquired them prior to 1945, but he finally found them, and carried them onto the front porch, along with a pencil and a ruled yellow scratch pad. In his experienced future—or his past-to-come—Allan Hartley had been accustomed to doing his thinking with a pencil. As reporter, as novelist plotting his work, as amateur chemist in his home laboratory, as scientific warfare research officer, his ideas had always been clarified by making notes. He pushed a chair to the table and built up the seat with cushions, wondering how soon he would become used to the proportional disparity between himself and the furniture. As he opened the books and took his pencil in his hand, there was one thing missing. If he could only smoke a pipe, now!

His father came out and stretched in a wicker chair with the Times book-review section. The morning hours passed. Allan Hartley leafed through one book and then the other. His pencil moved rapidly at times; at others, he doodled absently. There was no question, any more, in his mind, as to what or who he was. He was Allan Hartley, a man of forty-three, marooned in his own thirteen-year-old body, thirty years back in his own past. That was, of course, against all common sense, but he was easily able to ignore that objection. It had been made before: against the astronomy of Copernicus, and the geography of Columbus, and the biology of Darwin, and the industrial technology of Samuel Colt, and the military doctrines of Charles de Gaulle. Today's common sense had a habit of turning into tomorrow's utter nonsense. What he needed, right now, but bad, was a theory that would explain what had happened to him.

Understanding was beginning to dawn when Mrs. Stauber came out to announce midday dinner.

"I hope you von’t mind haffin’ it so early," she apologized. "Mein sister, Jennie, offer in Nippenose, she iss sick; I vant to go see her, dis afternoon, yet. I’ll be back in plenty time to get supper, Mr. Hartley."

"Hey, Dad!" Allan spoke up. "Why can’t we get our own supper, and have a picnic, like? That’d be fun, and Mrs. Stauber could stay as long as she wanted to."

His father looked at him. Such consideration for others was a most gratifying deviation from the juvenile norm; dawn of altruism, or something. He gave hearty assent:

"Why, of course, Mrs. Stauber. Allan and I can shift for ourselves, this evening; can’t we, Allan? You needn’t come back till tomorrow morning."

"Ach, t’ank you! T’ank you so mooch, Mr. Hartley."

At dinner, Allan got out from under the burden of conversation by questioning his father about the War and luring him into a lengthy dissertation on the difficulties of the forthcoming invasion of Japan. In view of what he remembered of the next twenty-four hours, Allan was secretly amused. His father was sure that the War would run on to mid-1946.

After dinner, they returned to the porch, Hartley père smoking a cigar and carrying out several law books. He only glanced at these occasionally; for the most part, he sat and blew smoke rings, and watched them float away. Some thrice-guilty felon was about to be triumphantly acquitted by a weeping jury; Allan could recognize a courtroom masterpiece in the process of incubation.

* * * * *

It was several hours later that the crunch of feet on the walk caused father and son to look up simultaneously. The approaching visitor was a tall man in a rumpled black suit; he had knobby wrists and big, awkward hands; black hair flecked with gray, and a harsh, bigoted face. Allan remembered him. Frank Gutchall. Lived on Campbell Street; a religious fanatic, and some sort of lay preacher. Maybe he needed legal advice; Allan could vaguely remember some incident--

"Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Gutchall. Lovely day, isn’t it?" Blake Hartley said.

Gutchall cleared his throat. "Mr. Hartley, I wonder if you could lend me a gun and some bullets," he began, embarrassedly. "My little dog’s been hurt, and it’s suffering something terrible. I want a gun, to put the poor thing out of its pain."
"Why, yes; of course. How would a 20-gauge shotgun do?" Blake Hartley asked. "You wouldn't want anything heavy."

Gutchall fidgeted. "Why, er, I was hoping you'd let me have a little gun." He held his hands about six inches apart. "A pistol, that I could put in my pocket. It wouldn't look right, to carry a hunting gun on the Lord's day; people wouldn't understand that it was for a work of mercy."

The lawyer nodded. In view of Gutchall's religious beliefs, the objection made sense.

"Well, I have a Colt .38-special," he said, "but you know, I belong to this Auxiliary Police outfit. If I were called out for duty, this evening, I'd need it. How soon could you bring it back?"

Something clicked in Allan Hartley's mind. He remembered, now, what that incident had been. He knew, too, what he had to do.

"Dad, aren't there some cartridges left for the Luger?" he asked.

Blake Hartley snapped his fingers. "By George, yes! I have a German automatic I can let you have, but I wish you'd bring it back as soon as possible. I'll get it for you."

Before he could rise, Allan was on his feet.

"Sit still, Dad; I'll get it. I know where the cartridges are." With that, he darted into the house and upstairs.

The Luger hung on the wall over his father's bed. Getting it down, he dismounted it, working with rapid precision. He used the blade of his pocketknife to unlock the endpiece of the breechblock, slipping out the firing pin and buttoning it into his shirt pocket. Then he reassembled the harmless pistol, and filled the clip with 9-millimeter cartridges from the bureau drawer.

There was an extension telephone beside the bed. Finding Gutchall's address in the directory, he lifted the telephone, and stretched his handkerchief over the mouthpiece. Then he dialed Police Headquarters.

"This is Blake Hartley," he lied, deepening his voice and copying his father's tone. "Frank Gutchall, who lives at...take this down"--he gave Gutchall's address--"has just borrowed a pistol from me, ostensibly to shoot a dog. He has no dog. He intends shooting his wife. Don't argue about how I know; there isn't time. Just take it for granted that I do. I disabled the pistol--took out the firing pin--but if he finds out what I did, he may get some other weapon. He's on his way home, but he's on foot. If you hurry, you may get a man there before he arrives, and grab him before he finds out the pistol won't shoot."

"O. K., Mr. Hartley. We'll take care of it. Thanks."

"And I wish you'd get my pistol back, as soon as you can. It's something I brought home from the other War, and I shouldn't like to lose it."

"We'll take care of that, too. Thank you, Mr. Hartley."

He hung up, and carried the Luger and the loaded clip down to the porch.

* * * * *

"Look, Mr. Gutchall; here's how it works," he said, showing it to the visitor. Then he slapped in the clip and yanked up on the toggle loading the chamber. "It's ready to shoot, now; this is the safety." He pushed it on. "When you're ready to shoot, just shove it forward and up, and then pull the trigger. You have to pull the trigger each time; it's loaded for eight shots. And be sure to put the safety back when you're through shooting."

"Did you load the chamber?" Blake Hartley demanded.

"Sure. It's on safe, now."

"Let me see." His father took the pistol, being careful to keep his finger out of the trigger guard, and looked at it. "Yes, that's all right. He repeated the instructions Allan had given, stressing the importance of putting the safety on after using. "Understand how it works, now?" he asked.

"Yes, I understand how it works. Thank you, Mr. Hartley. Thank you, too, young man."

Gutchall put the Luger in his hip pocket, made sure it wouldn't fall out, and took his departure.

"You shouldn't have loaded it," Hartley père reproved, when he was gone.

Allan sighed. This was it; the masquerade was over.

"I had to, to keep you from fooling with it," he said. "I didn't want you finding out that I'd taken out the firing pin."

"You what?"

"Gutchall didn't want that gun to shoot a dog. He has no dog. He meant to shoot his wife with it. He's a religious maniac; sees visions, hears voices, receives revelations, talks with the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost probably put him up to this caper. I'll submit that any man who holds long conversations with the Deity isn't to be trusted with a gun, and neither is any man who lies about why he wants one. And while I was at it, I called the police, on the upstairs phone. I had to use your name; I deepened my voice and talked through a handkerchief."

"You--" Blake Hartley jumped as though bee-stung. "Why did you have to do that?"

"You know why. I couldn't have told them, 'This is little Allan Hartley, just thirteen years old; please, Mr.}
Policeman, go and arrest Frank Gutchall before he goes root-toot-toot at his wife with my pappa's Luger. That would have gone over big, now, wouldn't it?"

"And suppose he really wants to shoot a dog; what sort of a mess will I be in?"

"No mess at all. If I'm wrong--which I'm not--I'll take the thump for it, myself. It'll pass for a dumb kid trick, and nothing'll be done. But if I'm right, you'll have to front for me. They'll keep your name out of it, but they'd give me a lot of cheap boy-hero publicity, which I don't want." He picked up his pencil again. "We should have the complete returns in about twenty minutes."

* * * * *

That was a ten-minute under-estimate, and it was another quarter-hour before the detective-sergeant who returned the Luger had finished congratulating Blake Hartley and giving him the thanks of the Department. After he had gone, the lawyer picked up the Luger, withdrew the clip, and ejected the round in the chamber.

"Well," he told his son, "you were right. You saved that woman's life." He looked at the automatic, and then handed it across the table. "Now, let's see you put that firing pin back."

Allan Hartley dismantled the weapon, inserted the missing part, and put it together again, then snapped it experimentally and returned it to his father. Blake Hartley looked at it again, and laid it on the table.

"Now, son, suppose we have a little talk," he said softly.

"But I explained everything." Allan objected innocently.

"You did not," his father retorted. "Yesterday you'd never have thought of a trick like this; why, you wouldn't even have known how to take this pistol apart. And at dinner, I caught you using language and expressing ideas that were entirely outside anything you'd ever known before. Now, I want to know--and I mean this literally."

Allan chuckled. "I hope you're not toying with the rather medieval notion of obsession," he said.

Blake Hartley started. Something very like that must have been flitting through his mind. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it abruptly.

"The trouble is, I'm not sure you aren't right," his son continued. "You say you find me--changed. When did you first notice a difference?"

"Last night, you were still my little boy. This morning--" Blake Hartley was talking more to himself than to Allan. "I don't know. You were unusually silent at breakfast. And come to think of it, there was something... something strange... about you when I saw you in the hall, upstairs... Allan!" he burst out, vehemently. "What has happened to you?"

Allan Hartley felt a twinge of pain. What his father was going through was almost what he, himself, had endured, in the first few minutes after waking.

"I wish I could be sure, myself, Dad," he said. "You see, when I woke, this morning, I hadn't the least recollection of anything I'd done yesterday. August 4, 1945, that is," he specified. "I was positively convinced that I was a man of forty-three, and my last memory was of lying on a stretcher, injured by a bomb explosion. And I was equally convinced that this had happened in 1975."

"Huh?" His father straightened. "Did you say nineteen seventy-five?" He thought for a moment. "That's right; in 1975, you will be forty-three. A bomb, you say?"

Allan nodded. "During the siege of Buffalo, in the Third World War," he said, "I was a captain in G5--Scientific Warfare, General Staff. There'd been a transpolar air invasion of Canada, and I'd been sent to the front to check on service failures of a new lubricating oil for combat equipment. A week after I got there, Ottawa fell, and the retreat started. We made a stand at Buffalo, and that was where I copped it. I remember being picked up, and getting a narcotic injection. The next thing I knew, I was in bed, upstairs, and it was 1945 again, and I was back in my own little thirteen-year-old body."

"Oh, Allan, you just had a nightmare to end nightmares!" his father assured him, laughing a trifle too heartily. "That's all!"

"That was one of the first things I thought of. I had to reject it; it just wouldn't fit the facts. Look; a normal dream is part of the dreamer's own physical brain, isn't it? Well, here is a part about two thousand per cent greater than the whole from which it was taken. Which is absurd."

"You mean all this Battle of Buffalo stuff? That's easy. All the radio commentators have been harping on the horrors of World War III, and you couldn't have avoided hearing some of it. You just have an undigested chunk of H. V. Kaltenborn raising hell in your subconscious."

"It wasn't just World War III; it was everything. My four years at high school, and my four years at Penn State, and my seven years as a reporter on the Philadelphia Record. And my novels: 'Children of the Mist,' 'Rose of Death,' 'Conqueror's Road.' They were no kid stuff. Why, yesterday I'd never even have thought of some of the ideas I used in my detective stories, that I published under a nom-de-plume. And my hobby, chemistry; I was pretty good at that. Patented a couple of processes that made me as much money as my writing. You think a thirteen-year-old just
dreamed all that up? Or, here; you speak French, don't you?” He switched languages and spoke at some length in
good conversational slang-spiced Parisian. "Too bad you don't speak Spanish, too," he added, reverting to English.
"Except for a Mexican accent you could cut with a machete, I'm even better there than in French. And I know some
German, and a little Russian."

Blake Hartley was staring at his son, stunned. It was some time before he could make himself speak.
"I could barely keep up with you, in French," he admitted. "I can swear that in the last thirteen years of your
life, you had absolutely no chance to learn it. All right; you lived till 1975, you say. Then, all of a sudden, you found
yourself back here, thirteen years old, in 1945. I suppose you remember everything in between?" he asked. "Did you
ever read James Branch Cabell? Remember Florian de Puysange, in 'The High Place'?"
"Yes. You find the same idea in 'Jurgen' too," Allan said. "You know, I'm beginning to wonder if Cabell
mightn't have known something he didn't want to write."
"But it's impossible!" Blake Hartley hit the table with his hand, so hard that the heavy pistol bounced. The loose
round he had ejected from the chamber toppled over and started to roll, falling off the edge. He stooped and picked it
up. "How can you go back, against time? And the time you claim you came from doesn't exist, now; it hasn't
happened yet." He reached for the pistol magazine, to insert the cartridge, and as he did, he saw the books in front of
his son. "Dunne's 'Experiment with Time,'" he commented. "And J. N. M. Tyrrell's 'Science and Psychical
Phenomena.' Are you trying to work out a theory?"
"Yes." It encouraged Allan to see that his father had unconsciously adopted an adult-to-adult manner. "I think
I'm getting somewhere, too. You've read these books? Well, look, Dad; what's your attitude on precognition? The
ability of the human mind to exhibit real knowledge, apart from logical inference, of future events? You think
Dunne is telling the truth about his experiences? Or that the cases in Tyrrell's book are properly verified, and can't be
explained away on the basis of chance?"

Blake Hartley frowned. "I don't know," he confessed. "The evidence is the sort that any court in the world
would accept, if it concerned ordinary, normal events. Especially the cases investigated by the Society for Psychical
Research: they have been verified. But how can anybody know of something that hasn't happened yet? If it hasn't
happened yet, it doesn't exist, and you can't have real knowledge of something that has no real existence."
"Tyrrell discusses that dilemma, and doesn't dispose of it. I think I can. If somebody has real knowledge of the
future, then the future must be available to the present mind. And if any moment other than the bare present exists,
then all time must be totally present; every moment must be perpetually coexistent with every other moment," Allan
said.
"Yes. I think I see what you mean. That was Dunne's idea, wasn't it?"
"No. Dunne postulated an infinite series of time dimensions, the entire extent of each being the bare present
moment of the next. What I'm postulating is the perpetual coexistence of every moment of time in this dimension,
just as every graduation on a yardstick exists equally with every other graduation, but each at a different point in
space."
"Well, as far as duration and sequence go, that's all right," the father agreed. "But how about the 'Passage of
Time'?"
"Well, time does appear to pass. So does the landscape you see from a moving car window. I'll suggest that
both are illusions of the same kind. We imagine time to be dynamic, because we've never viewed it from a fixed
point, but if it is totally present, then it must be static, and in that case, we're moving through time."
"That seems all right. But what's your car window?"
"If all time is totally present, then you must exist simultaneously at every moment along your individual life
span," Allan said. "Your physical body, and your mind, and all the thoughts contained in your mind, each at its
appropriate moment in sequence. But what is it that exists only at the bare moment we think of as now?"

Blake Hartley grinned. Already, he was accepting his small son as an intellectual equal.
"Please, teacher; what?"
"Your consciousness. And don't say, 'What's that?' Teacher doesn't know. But we're only conscious of one
moment; the illusory now. This is 'now,' and it was 'now' when you asked that question, and it'll be 'now' when I stop
talking, but each is a different moment. We imagine that all those nows are rushing past us. Really, they're standing
still, and our consciousness is whizzing past them."

His father thought that over for some time. Then he sat up. "Hey!" he cried, suddenly. "If some part of our ego
is time-free and passes from moment to moment, it must be extraphysical, because the physical body exists at every
moment through which the consciousness passes. And if it's extraphysical, there's no reason whatever for assuming
that it passes out of existence when it reaches the moment of the death of the body. Why, there's logical evidence for
survival, independent of any alleged spirit communication! You can toss out Patience Worth, and Mrs. Osborne Leonard's Feda, and Sir Oliver Lodge's son, and Wilfred Brandon, and all the other spirit-communicators, and you still have evidence."

"I hadn't thought of that," Allan confessed. "I think you're right. Well, let's put that at the bottom of the agenda and get on with this time business. You 'lose consciousness' as in sleep; where does your consciousness go? I think it simply detaches from the moment at which you go to sleep, and moves backward or forward along the line of moment-sequence, to some prior or subsequent moment, attaching there."

"Well, why don't we know anything about that?" Blake Hartley asked. "It never seems to happen. We go to sleep tonight, and it's always tomorrow morning when we wake; never day-before-yesterday, or last month, or next year."

"It never ... or almost never ... seems to happen; you're right there. Know why? Because if the consciousness goes forward, it attaches at a moment when the physical brain contains memories of the previous, consciously unexperienced, moment. You wake, remembering the evening before, because that's the memory contained in your mind at that moment, and back of it are memories of all the events in the interim. See?"

"Yes. But how about backward movement, like this experience of yours?"

"This experience of mine may not be unique, but I never heard of another case like it. What usually happens is that the memories carried back by the consciousness are buried in the subconscious mind. You know how thick the wall between the subconscious and the conscious mind is. These dreams of Dunne's, and the cases in Tyrrell's book, are leakage. That's why precognitions are usually incomplete and distorted, and generally trivial. The wonder isn't that good cases are so few; it's surprising that there are any at all." Allan looked at the papers in front of him. "I haven't begun to theorize about how I managed to remember everything. It may have been the radiations from the bomb, or the effect of the narcotic, or both together, or something at this end, or a combination of all three. But the fact remains that my subconscious barrier didn't function, and everything got through. So, you see, I am obsessed--by my own future identity."

"And I'd been afraid that you'd been, well, taken-over by some ... some outsider." Blake Hartley grinned weakly. "I don't mind admitting, Allan, that what's happened has been a shock. But that other ... I just couldn't have taken that."

* * * * *

"No. Not and stayed sane. But really, I am your son; the same entity I was yesterday. I've just had what you might call an educational short cut."

"I'll say you have!" His father laughed in real amusement. He discovered that his cigar had gone out, and re-lit it. "Here; if you can remember the next thirty years, suppose you tell me when the War's going to end. This one, I mean."

"The Japanese surrender will be announced at exactly 1901--7:01 P. M. present style--on August 14. A week from Tuesday. Better make sure we have plenty of grub in the house by then. Everything will be closed up tight till Thursday morning; even the restaurants. I remember, we had nothing to eat in the house but some scraps."

"Well! It is handy, having a prophet in the family! I'll see to it Mrs. Stauber gets plenty of groceries in.... Tuesday a week? That's pretty sudden, isn't it?"

"The Japs are going to think so," Allan replied. He went on to describe what was going to happen. His father swore softly. "You know, I've heard talk about atomic energy, but I thought it was just Buck Rogers stuff. Was that the sort of bomb that got you?"

"That was a firecracker to the bomb that got me. That thing exploded a good ten miles away."

Blake Hartley whistled softly. "And that's going to happen in thirty years! You know, son, if I were you, I wouldn't like to have to know about a thing like that." He looked at Allan for a moment. "Please, if you know, don't ever tell me when I'm going to die."

Allan smiled. "I can't. I had a letter from you just before I left for the front. You were seventy-eight, then, and you were still hunting, and fishing, and flying your own plane. But I'm not going to get killed in any Battle of Buffalo, this time, and if I can prevent it, and I think I can, there won't be any World War III."

"But--You say all time exists, perpetually coexistent and totally present," his father said. "Then it's right there in front of you, and you're getting closer to it, every watch tick."

Allan Hartley shook his head. "You know what I remembered, when Frank Gutchall came to borrow a gun?" he asked. "Well, the other time, I hadn't been home: I'd been swimming at the Canoe Club, with Larry Morton. When I got home, about half an hour from now, I found the house full of cops. Gutchall talked the .38 officers' model out of you, and gone home; he'd shot his wife four times through the body, finished her off with another one back of the ear, and then used his sixth shot to blast his brains out. The cops traced the gun; they took a very poor view of your lending it to him. You never got it back."
"Trust that gang to keep a good gun," the lawyer said.

"I didn't want us to lose it, this time, and I didn't want to see you lose face around City Hall. Gutchalls, of course, are expendable," Allan said. "But my main reason for fixing Frank Gutchall up with a padded cell was that I wanted to know whether or not the future could be altered. I have it on experimental authority that it can be. There must be additional dimensions of time; lines of alternate probabilities. Something like William Seabrook's witch-doctor friend's Fan-Shaped Destiny. When I brought memories of the future back to the present, I added certain factors to the causal chain. That set up an entirely new line of probabilities. On no notice at all, I stopped a murder and a suicide. With thirty years to work, I can stop a world war. I'll have the means to do it, too."

"The means?"

"Unlimited wealth and influence. Here." Allan picked up a sheet and handed it to his father. "Used properly, we can make two or three million on that, alone. A list of all the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont winners to 1970. That'll furnish us primary capital. Then, remember, I was something of a chemist. I took it up, originally, to get background material for one of my detective stories; it fascinated me, and I made it a hobby, and then a source of income. I'm thirty years ahead of any chemist in the world, now. You remember I. G. Farbenindustrie? Ten years from now, we'll make them look like pikers."

His father looked at the yellow sheet. "Assault, at eight to one," he said. "I can scrape up about five thousand for that--Yes; in ten years--Any other little operations you have in mind?" he asked.

"About 1950, we start building a political organization, here in Pennsylvania. In 1960, I think we can elect you President. The world situation will be crucial, by that time, and we had a good-natured nonentity in the White House then, who let things go till war became inevitable. I think President Hartley can be trusted to take a strong line of policy. In the meantime, you can read Machiavelli."

"That's my little boy, talking!"

Blake Hartley said softly. "All right, son; I'll do just what you tell me, and when you grow up, I'll be president.... Let's go get supper, now."

THE END.
Foraminifera 9

Paptaste udderly, semped sempsemp dezhavoo, qued schmerz--Excuse me. I mean to say that it was like an endless diet of days, boring, tedious....

No, it loses too much in the translation. Explete my reasons, I say. Do my reasons matter? No, not to you, for you are troglodytes, knowing nothing of causes, understanding only acts. Acts and facts, I will give you acts and facts.

First you must know how I am called. My "name" is Foraminifera 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, and I am of adequate age and size. (If you doubt this, I am prepared to fight.) Once the--the tediety of life, as you might say, had made itself clear to me, there were, of course, only two alternatives. I do not like to die, so that possibility was out; and the remaining alternative was flight.

Naturally, the necessary machinery was available to me. I arrogated a small viewing machine, and scanned the centuries of the past in the hope that a sanctuary might reveal itself to my aching eyes. Kwel tediety that was! Back, back I went through the ages. Back to the Century of the Dog, back to the Age of the Crippled Men. I found no time better than my own. Back and back I peered, back as far as the Numbered Years. The Twenty-Eighth Century was boredom unendurable, the Twenty-Sixth a morass of dullness. Twenty-Fifth, Twenty-Fourth--wherever I looked, tediety was what I found.

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I snapped off the machine and considered. Put the problem thus: Was there in all of the pages of history no age in which a 9-Hart Bailey's Beam might find adventure and excitement? There had to be! It was not possible, I told myself, despairing, that from the dawn of the dreaming primates until my own time there was no era at all in which I could be--happy? Yes, I suppose happiness is what I was looking for. But where was it? In my viewer, I had fifty centuries or more to look back upon. And that was, I decreed, the trouble; I could spend my life staring into the viewer, and yet never discover the time that was right for me. There were simply too many eras to choose from. It was like an enormous library in which there must, there had to be, contained the one fact I was looking for--that, lacking an index, I might wear my life away and never find.

"Index!"

I said the word aloud! For, to be sure, it was the answer. I had the freedom of the Learning Lodge, and the index in the reading room could easily find for me just what I wanted.

Splendid, splendid! I almost felt cheerful. I quickly returned the viewer I had been using to the keeper, and received my deposit back. I hurried to the Learning Lodge and fed my specifications into the index, as follows, that is to say: Find me a time in recent past where there is adventure and excitement, where there is a secret, colorful band of desperadoes with whom I can ally myself. I then added two specifications--second, that it should be before the time of the high radiation levels; and first, that it should be after the discovery of anesthesia, in case of accident--and retired to a desk in the reading room to await results.

It took only a few moments, which I occupied in making a list of the gear I wished to take with me. Then there was a hiss and a crackle, and in the receiver of the desk a book appeared. I unzipped the case, took it out, and opened it to the pages marked on the attached reading tape.

I had found my wonderland of adventure!

* * * * *

Ah, hours and days of exciting preparation! What a round of packing and buying; what a filling out of forms and a stamping of visas; what an orgy of injections and inoculations and preventive therapy! Merely getting ready for the trip made my pulse race faster and my adrenalin balance rise to the very point of paranoia; it was like being given a true blue new chance to live.
At last I was ready. I stepped into the transmission capsule; set the dials; unlocked the door, stepped out; collapsed the capsule and stored it away in my carry-all; and looked about at my new home.

Pyew! Kwel smell of staleness, of sourness, above all of coldness! It was a close matter then if I would be able to keep from a violent eructative stenosis, as you say. I closed my eyes and remembered warm violets for a moment, and then it was all right.

The coldness was not merely a smell; it was a physical fact. There was a damp grayish substance underfoot which I recognized as snow; and in a hard-surfaced roadway there were a number of wheeled vehicles moving, which caused the liquefying snow to splash about me. I adjusted my coat controls for warmth and deflection, but that was the best I could do. The reek of stale decay remained. Then there were also the buildings, painfully almost vertical. I believe it would not have disturbed me if they had been truly vertical; but many of them were minutes of arc from a true perpendicular, all of them covered with a carbonaceous material which I instantly perceived was an inadvertent deposit from the air. It was a bad beginning!

However, I was not bored.

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I made my way down the "street," as you say, toward where a group of young men were walking toward me, five abreast. As I came near, they looked at me with interest and kwel respect, conversing with each other in whispers.

I addressed them: "Sirs, please direct me to the nearest recruiting office, as you call it, for the dread Camorra."

They stopped and pressed about me, looking at me intently. They were handsomely, though crudely dressed in coats of a striking orange color, and long trousers of an extremely dark material.

I decreed that I might not have made them understand me--it is always probable, it is understood, that a quicknik course in dialects of the past may not give one instant command of spoken communication in the field. I spoke again: "I wish to encounter a representative of the Camorra, in other words the Black Hand, in other words the cruel and sinister Sicilian terrorists named the Mafia. Do you know where these can be found?"

One of them said, "Nay. What's that jive?"

I puzzled over what he had said for a moment, but in the end decreed that his message was sensefree. As I was about to speak, however, he said suddenly: "Let's rove, man." And all five of them walked quickly away a few "yards." It was quite disappointing. I observed them conferring among themselves, glancing at me, and for a time proposed terminating my venture, for I then believed that it would be better to return "home," as you say, in order to more adequately research the matter.

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However, the five young men came toward me again. The one who had spoken before, who I now detected was somewhat taller and fatter than the others, spoke as follows: "You're wanting the Mafia?" I agreed. He looked at me for a moment. "Are you holding?"

He was inordinately hard to understand. I said, slowly and with patience, "Keska that 'holding' say?"

"Money, man. You going to slip us something to help you find these cats?"

"Certainly, money. I have a great quantity of money instantly available," I rejoined him. This appeared to relieve his mind.

There was a short pause, directly after which this first of the young men spoke: "You're on, man. Yeah, come with us. What's to call you?" I queried this last statement, and he expanded: "The name. What's the name?"

"You may call me Foraminifera 9," I directed, since I wished to be incognito, as you put it, and we proceeded along the "street." All five of the young men indicated a desire to serve me, offering indeed to take my carry-all. I rejected this, politely.

I looked about me with lively interest, as you may well believe. Kwel dirt, kwel dinginess, kwel cold! And yet there was a certain charm which I can determine no way of expressing in this language. Acts and facts, of course. I shall not attempt to capture the subjectivity which is the charm, only to transcribe the physical datum--perhaps even data, who knows? My companions, for example: They were in appearance overwrought, looking about them continually, stopping entirely and drawing me with them into the shelter of a "door" when another man, this one wearing blue clothing and a visored hat appeared. Yet they were clearly devoted to me, at that moment, since they had put aside their own projects in order to escort me without delay to the Mafia.

* * * * *

Mafia! Fortunate that I had found them to lead me to the Mafia! For it had been clear in the historical work I had consulted that it was not ultimately easy to gain access to the Mafia. Indeed, so secret were they that I had detected no trace of their existence in other histories of the period. Had I relied only on the conventional work, I might never have known of their great underground struggle against what you term society. It was only in the actual contemporary volume itself, the curiosity titled U.S.A. Confidential by one Lait and one Mortimer, that I had
descried that, throughout the world, this great revolutionary organization flexed its tentacles, the plexus within a short distance of where I now stood, battling courageously. With me to help them, what heights might we not attain! Kwel dramatic delight!

My meditations were interrupted. "Boomers!" asserted one of my five escorts in a loud, frightened tone. "Let's cut, man!" he continued, leading me with them into another entrance. It appeared, as well as I could decree, that the cause of his ejaculative outcry was the discovery of perhaps three, perhaps four, other young men, in coats of the same shiny material as my escorts. The difference was that they were of a different color, being blue.

We hastened along a lengthy chamber which was quite dark, immediately after which the large, heavy one opened a way to a serrated incline leading downward. It was extremely dark, I should say. There was also an extreme smell, quite like that of the outer air, but enormously intensified; one would suspect that there was an incomplete combustion of, perhaps, wood or coal, as well as a certain quantity of general decay. At any rate, we reached the bottom of the incline, and my escort behaved quite badly. One of them said to the other four, in these words: "Them jumpers follow us sure. Yeah, there's much trouble. What's to prime this guy now and split?"

Instantly they fell upon me with violence. I had fortunately become rather alarmed at their visible emotion of fear, and already had taken from my carry-all a Stollgratz 16, so that I quickly turned it on them. I started to replace the Stollgratz 16 as they fell to the floor, yet I realized that there might be an additional element of danger. Instead of putting the Stollgratz 16 in with the other trade goods, which I had brought to assist me in negotiating with the Mafia, I transferred it to my jacket. It had become clear to me that the five young men of my escort had intended to abduct and rob me--indeed had intended it all along, perhaps having never intended to convoy me to the office of the Mafia. And the other young men, those who wore the blue jackets in place of the orange, were already descending the incline toward me, quite rapidly.

"Stop," I directed them. "I shall not entrust myself to you until you have given me evidence that you entirely deserve such trust."

They all halted, regarding me and the Stollgratz 16. I detected that one of them said to another: "That cat's got a zip."

The other denied this, saying: "That no zip, man. Yeah, look at them Leopards. Say, you bust them flunkies with that thing?"

I perceived his meaning quite quickly. "You are 'correct,'" I rejoined. "Are you associated in friendship with them flunkies?"

"Hell, no. Yeah, they're Leopards and we're Boomer Dukes. You cool them, you do us much good." I received this information as indicating that the two socio-economic units were inimical, and unfortunately lapsed into an example of the Bivalent Error. Since p implied not-q, I sloppily assumed that not-q implied r (with, you understand, r being taken as the class of phenomena pertinently favorable to me). This was a very poor construction, and of course resulted in certain difficulties. Qued, after all. I stated:

"Them flunkies offered to conduct me to a recruiting office, as you say, of the Mafia, but instead tried to take from me the much money I am holding." I then went on to describe to them my desire to attain contact with the said Mafia; meanwhile they descended further and grouped about me in the very little light, examining curiously the motionless figures of the Leopards.

They seemed to be greatly impressed; and at the same time, very much puzzled. Naturally. They looked at the Leopards, and then at me.

They gave every evidence of wishing to help me; but of course if I had not forgotten that one cannot assume from the statements "not-Leopard implies Boomer Duke" and "not-Leopard implies Foraminifera 9" that, qued, "Boomer Duke implies Foraminifera 9" ... if I had not forgotten this, I say, I should not have been "deceived." For in practice they were as little favorable to me as the Leopards. A certain member of their party reached a position behind me.

I quickly perceived that his intention was not favorable, and attempted to turn around in order to discharge at him with the Stollgratz 16, but he was very rapid. He had a metallic cylinder, and with it struck my head, knocking "me" unconscious.

This candy store is called Chris's. There must be ten thousand like it in the city. A marble counter with perhaps five stools, a display case of cigars and a bigger one of candy, a few dozen girlie magazines hanging by clothespin-sort-of things from wire ropes along the wall. It has a couple of very small glass-topped tables under the magazines. And a juke--I can't imagine a place like Chris's without a juke.
I had been sitting around Chris's for a couple of hours, and I was beginning to get edgy. The reason I was sitting around Chris's was not that I liked Cokes particularly, but that it was one of the hanging-out places of a juvenile gang called The Leopards, with whom I had been trying to work for nearly a year; and the reason I was becoming edgy was that I didn't see any of them there.

The boy behind the counter—he had the same first name as I, Walter in both cases, though my last name is Hutner and his is, I believe, something Puerto Rican--the boy behind the counter was dummying up, too. I tried to talk to him, on and off, when he wasn't busy. He wasn't busy most of the time; it was too cold for sodas. But he just didn't want to talk. Now, these kids love to talk. A lot of what they say doesn't make sense—either bullying, or bragging, or purposeless swearing—but talk is their normal state; when they quiet down it means trouble. For instance, if you ever find yourself walking down Thirty-Fifth Street and a couple of kids pass you, talking, you don't have to bother looking around; but if they stop talking, turn quickly. You're about to be mugged. Not that Walt was a mugger—as far as I know; but that's the pattern of the enclave.

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So his being quiet was a bad sign. It might mean that a rumble was brewing—and that meant that my work so far had been pretty nearly a failure. Even worse, it might mean that somehow the Leopards had discovered that I had at last passed my examinations and been appointed to the New York City Police Force as a rookie patrolman, Shield 8805.

Trying to work with these kids is hard enough at best. They don't like outsiders. But they particularly hate cops, and I had been trying for some weeks to decide how I could break the news to them.

The door opened. Hawk stood there. He didn't look at me, which was a bad sign. Hawk was one of the youngest in the Leopards, a skinny, very dark kid who had been reasonably friendly to me. He stood in the open door, with snow blowing in past him. "Walt. Out here, man."

It wasn't me he meant—they call me "Champ," I suppose because I beat them all shooting eight-ball pool. Walt put down the comic he had been reading and walked out, also without looking at me. They closed the door.

* * * * *

Time passed. I saw them through the window, talking to each other, looking at me. It was something, all right. They were scared. That's bad, because these kids are like wild animals; if you scare them, they hit first—it's the only way they know to defend themselves. But on the other hand, a rumble wouldn't scare them—not where they would show it; and finding out about the shield in my pocket wouldn't scare them, either. They hated cops, as I say; but cops were a part of their environment. It was strange, and baffling.

Walt came back in, and Hawk walked rapidly away. Walt went behind the counter, lit a cigaret, wiped at the marble top, picked up his comic, put it down again and finally looked at me. He said: "Some punk busted Fayo and a couple of the boys. It's real trouble."

I didn't say anything.

He took a puff on his cigaret. "They're chilled, Champ. Five of them."

"Chilled? Dead?" It sounded bad; there hadn't been a real rumble in months, not with a killing.

He shook his head. "Not dead. You're wanting to see, you go down Gomez's cellar. Yeah, they're all stiff but they're breathing. I be along soon as the old man comes back in the store."

He looked pretty sick. I left it at that and hurried down the block to the tenement where the Gomez family lived, and then I found out why.

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They were sprawled on the filthy floor of the cellar like winoes in an alley. Fayo, who ran the gang; Jap; Baker; two others I didn't know as well. They were breathing, as Walt had said, but you just couldn't wake them up.

Hawk and his twin brother, Yogi, were there with them, looking scared. I couldn't blame them. The kids looked perfectly all right, but it was obvious that they weren't. I bent down and smelled, but there was no trace of liquor or anything else on their breath.

I stood up. "We'd better get a doctor."

"Nay. You call the meat wagon, and a cop comes right with it, man," Yogi said, and his brother nodded.

I laid off that for a moment. "What happened?"

Hawk said, "You know that witch Gloria, goes with one of the Boomer Dukes? She opened her big mouth to my girl. Yeah, opened her mouth and much bad talk came out. Said Fayo primed some jumper with a zip and the punk cooled him, and then a couple of the Boomers moved in real cool. Now they got the punk with the zip and much other stuff, real stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

Hawk looked worried. He finally admitted that he didn't know what kind of stuff, but it was something dangerous in the way of weapons. It had been the "zip" that had knocked out the five Leopards.
I sent Hawk out to the drug-store for smelling salts and containers of hot black coffee—not that I knew what I was doing, of course, but they were dead set against calling an ambulance. And the boys didn't seem to be in any particular danger, only sleep.

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However, even then I knew that this kind of trouble was something I couldn't handle alone. It was a tossup what to do—the smart thing was to call the precinct right then and there; but I couldn't help feeling that that would make the Leopards clam up hopelessly. The six months I had spent trying to work with them had not been too successful—a lot of the other neighborhood workers had made a lot more progress than I—but at least they were willing to talk to me; and they wouldn't talk to uniformed police.

Besides, as soon as I had been sworn in, the day before, I had begun the practice of carrying my .38 at all times, as the regulations say. It was in my coat. There was no reason for me to feel I needed it. But I did. If there was any truth to the story of a "zip" knocking out the boys—and I had all five of them right there for evidence—I had the unpleasant conviction that there was real trouble circulating around East Harlem that afternoon.

"Champ. They all waking up!"

I turned around, and Hawk was right. The five Leopards, all of a sudden, were stirring and opening their eyes. Maybe the smelling salts had something to do with it, but I rather think not.

We fed them some of the black coffee, still reasonably hot. They were scared; they were more scared than anything I had ever seen in those kids before. They could hardly talk at first, and when finally they came around enough to tell me what had happened I could hardly believe them. This man had been small and peculiar, and he had been looking for, of all things, the "Mafia," which he had read about in history books—old history books.

Well, it didn't make sense, unless you were prepared to make a certain assumption that I refused to make. Man from Mars? Nonsense. Or from the future? Equally ridiculous....

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Then the five Leopards, reviving, began to walk around. The cellar was dark and dirty, and packed with the accumulation of generations in the way of old furniture and rat-inhabited mattresses and piles of newspapers; it wasn't surprising that we hadn't noticed the little gleaming thing that had apparently rolled under an abandoned potbelly stove.

Jap picked it up, squalled, dropped it and yelled for me.

I touched it cautiously, and it tingled. It wasn't painful, but it was an odd, unexpected feeling—perhaps you've come across the "buzzers" that novelty stores sell which, concealed in the palm, give a sudden, surprising tingle when the owner shakes hands with an unsuspecting friend. It was like that, like a mild electric shock. I picked it up and held it. It gleamed brightly, with a light of its own; it was round; it made a faint droning sound; I turned it over, and it spoke to me. It said in a friendly, feminine whisper: Warning, this portatron attuned only to Bailey's Beam percepts. Remain quiescent until the Adjuster comes.

That settled it. Any time a lit-up cue ball talks to me, I refer the matter to higher authority. I decided on the spot that I was heading for the precinct house, no matter what the Leopards thought.

But when I turned and headed for the stairs, I couldn't move. My feet simply would not lift off the ground. I twisted, and stumbled, and fell in a heap; I yelled for help, but it didn't do any good. The Leopards couldn't move either.

We were stuck there in Gomez's cellar, as though we had been nailed to the filthy floor.

III

Cow

When I see what this flunky has done to them Leopards, I call him a cool cat right away. But then we jump him and he ain't so cool. Angel and Tiny grab him under the arms and I'm grabbing the stuff he's carrying. Yeah, we get out of there.

There's bulls on the street, so we cut through the back and over the fences. Tiny don't like that. He tells me, "Cow. What's to leave this cat here? He must weigh eighteen tons." "You're bringing him," I tell him, so he shuts up. That's how it is in the Boomer Dukes. When Cow talks, them other flunkies shut up fast.

We get him in the loft over the R. and I. Social Club. Damn, but it's cold up there. I can hear the pool balls clicking down below so I pass the word to keep quiet. Then I give this guy the foot and pretty soon he wakes up.

As soon as I talk to him a little bit I figure we had luck riding with us when we see them Leopards. This cat's got real bad stuff. Yeah, I never hear of anything like it. But what it takes to make a fight he's got. I take my old pistol and give it to Tiny. Hell, it makes him happy and what's it cost me? Because what this cat's got makes that pistol look like something for babies.

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First he don't want to talk. "Stomp him," I tell Angel, but he's scared. He says, "Nay. This is a real weird cat,
Cow. I'm for cutting out of here."

"Stomp him," I tell him again, pretty quiet, but he does it. He don't have to tell me this cat's weird, but when the cat gets the foot a couple of times he's willing to talk. Yeah, he talks real funny, but that don't matter to me. We take all the loot out of his bag, and I make this cat tell me what it's to do. Damn, I don't know what he's talking about that one time out of six, but I know enough. Even Tiny catches on after a while, because I see him put down that funky old pistol I gave him that he's been loving up.

I'm feeling pretty good. I wish a couple of them chicken Leopards would turn up so I could show them what they missed out on. Yeah, I'll take on them, and the Black Dogs, and all the cops in the world all at once--that's how good I'm feeling. I feel so good that I don't even like it when Angel lets out a yell and comes up with a wad of loot. It's like I want to prime the U.S. Mint for chickenfeed, I don't want it to come so easy.

But money's on hand, so I take it off Angel and count it. This cat was really loaded; there must be a thousand dollars here.

I take a handful of it and hand it over to Angel real cool. "Get us some charge," I tell him. "There's much to do and I'm feeling ready for some charge to do it with."

"How many sticks you want me to get?" he asks, holding on to that money like he never saw any before.

I tell him: "Sticks? Nay. I'm for real stuff tonight. You find Four-Eye and get us some horse." Yeah, he digs me then. He looks like he's pretty scared and I know he is, because this punk hasn't had anything bigger than reefers in his life. But I'm for busting a couple of caps of H, and what I do he's going to do. He takes off to find Four-Eye and the rest of us get busy on this cat with the funny artillery until he gets back.

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It's like I'm a million miles down Dream Street. Hell, I don't want to wake up.

But the H is wearing off and I'm feeling mean. Damn, I'll stomp my mother if she talks big to me right then.

I'm the first one on my feet and I'm looking for trouble. The whole place is full now. Angel must have passed the word to everybody in the Dukes, but I don't even remember them coming in. There's eight or ten cats lying around on the floor now, not even moving. This won't do, I decide.

If I'm on my feet, they're all going to be on their feet. I start to give them the foot and they begin to move. Even the weirdie must've had some H. I'm guessing that somebody slipped him some to see what would happen, because he's off on Cloud Number Nine. Yeah, they're feeling real mean when they wake up, but I handle them cool. Even that little flunky Sailor starts to go up against me but I look at him cool and he chickens. Angel and Pete are real sick, with the shakes and the heaves, but I ain't waiting for them to feel good. "Give me that loot," I tell Tiny, and he hands over the stuff we took off the weirdie. I start to pass out the stuff.

"What's to do with this stuff?" Tiny asks me, looking at what I'm giving him.

I tell him, "Point it and shoot it." He isn't listening when the weirdie's telling me what the stuff is. He wants to know what it does, but I don't know that. I just tell him, "Point it and shoot it, man." I've sent one of the cats out for drinks and smokes and he's back by then, and we're all beginning to feel a little better, only still pretty mean. They begin to dig me.

"Yeah, it sounds like a rumble," one of them says, after a while.

I give him the nod, cool. "You're calling it," I tell him. "There's much fighting tonight. The Boomer Dukes is taking on the world!"

IV

Sandy Van Pelt

The front office thought the radio car would give us a break in spot news coverage, and I guessed as wrong as they did. I had been covering City Hall long enough, and that's no place to build a career--the Press Association is very tight there, there's not much chance of getting any kind of exclusive story because of the sharing agreements. So I put in for the radio car. It meant taking the night shift, but I got it.

I suppose the front office got their money's worth, because they played up every lousy auto smash the radio car covered as though it were the story of the Second Coming, and maybe it helped circulation. But I had been on it for four months and, wouldn't you know it, there wasn't a decent murder, or sewer explosion, or running gun fight between six P.M. and six A.M. any night I was on duty in those whole four months. What made it worse, the kid they gave me as photographer--Sol Detweiler, his name was--couldn't drive worth a damn, so I was stuck with chauffeuring us around.

We had just been out to LaGuardia to see if it was true that Marilyn Monroe was sneaking into town with Aly Khan on a night plane--it wasn't--and we were coming across the Triborough Bridge, heading south toward the East River Drive, when the office called. I pulled over and parked and answered the radiophone.

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It was Harrison, the night City Editor. "Listen, Sandy, there's a gang fight in East Harlem. Where are you
now?"

"It didn't sound like much to me, I admit. "There's always a gang fight in East Harlem, Harrison. I'm cold and I'm on my way down to Night Court, where there may or may not be a story; but at least I can get my feet warm."

"Where are you now?" Harrison wasn't fooling. I looked at Sol, on the seat next to me; I thought I had heard him snicker. He began to fiddle with his camera without looking at me. I pushed the "talk" button and told Harrison where I was. It pleased him very much; I wasn't more than six blocks from where this big rumble was going on, he told me, and he made it very clear that I was to get on over there immediately.

I pulled away from the curb, wondering why I had ever wanted to be a newspaperman; I could have made five times as much money for half as much work in an ad agency. To make it worse, I heard Sol chuckle again. The reason he was so amused was that when we first teamed up I made the mistake of telling him what a hot reporter I was, and I had been visibly cooling off before his eyes for a better than four straight months.

Believe me, I was at the very bottom of my career that night. For five cents cash I would have parked the car, thrown the keys in the East River, and taken the first bus out of town. I was absolutely positive that the story would be a bust and all I would get out of it would be a bad cold from walking around in the snow.

And if that doesn't show you what a hot newspaperman I really am, nothing will.

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Sol began to act interested as we reached the corner Harrison had told us to go to. "That's Chris's," he said, pointing at a little candy store. "And that must be the pool hall where the Leopards hang out."

"You know this place?"

He nodded. "I know a man named Walter Hutner. He and I went to school together, until he dropped out, couple weeks ago. He quit college to go to the Police Academy. He wanted to be a cop."

I looked at him. "You're going to college?"

"Sure, Mr. Van Pelt. Wally Hutner was a sociology major--I'm journalism--but we had a couple of classes together. He had a part-time job with a neighborhood council up here, acting as a sort of adult adviser for one of the gangs."

"They need advice on how to be gangs?"

"No, that's not it, Mr. Van Pelt. The councils try to get their workers accepted enough to bring the kids in to the social centers, that's all. They try to get them off the streets. Wally was working with a bunch called the Leopards."

I shut him up. "Tell me about it later!" I stopped the car and rolled down a window, listening.

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Yes, there was something going on all right. Not at the corner Harrison had mentioned--there wasn't a soul in sight in any direction. But I could hear what sounded like gunfire and yelling, and, my God, even bombs going off! And it wasn't too far away. There were sirens, too--squad cars, no doubt.

"It's over that way!" Sol yelled, pointing. He looked as though he was having the time of his life, all keyed up and delighted. He didn't have to tell me where the noise was coming from, I could hear for myself. It sounded like D-Day at Normandy, and I didn't like the sound of it.

I made a quick decision and slammed on the brakes, then backed the car back the way we had come. Sol looked at me. "What--"

"Local color," I explained quickly. "This the place you were talking about? Chris's? Let's go in and see if we can find some of these hoodlums."

"But, Mr. Van Pelt, all the pictures are over where the fight's going on!"

"Pictures, shmictures! Come on!" I got out in front of the candy store, and the only thing he could do was follow me.

Whatever they were doing, they were making the devil's own racket about it. Now that I looked a little more closely I could see that they must have come this way; the candy store's windows were broken; every other street light was smashed; and what had at first looked like a flight of steps in front of a tenement across the street wasn't anything of the kind--it was a pile of bricks and stone from the false-front cornice on the roof! How in the world they had managed to knock that down I had no idea; but it sort of convinced me that, after all, Harrison had been right about this being a big fight. Over where the noise was coming from there were queer flashing lights in the clouds overhead--reflecting exploding flares, I thought.

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No, I didn't want to go over where the pictures were. I like living. If it had been a normal Harlem rumble with broken bottles and knives, or maybe even home-made zip guns--I might have taken a chance on it, but this was for real.

"Come on," I yelled to Sol, and we pushed the door open to the candy store.

At first there didn't seem to be anyone in, but after we called a couple times a kid of about sixteen, coffee-
colored and scared-looking, stuck his head up above the counter.

"You. What's going on here?" I demanded. He looked at me as if I was some kind of a two-headed monster. "Come on, kid. Tell us what happened."

"Excuse me, Mr. Van Pelt." Sol cut in ahead of me and began talking to the kid in Spanish. It got a rise out of him; at least Sol got an answer. My Spanish is only a little bit better than my Swahili, so I missed what was going on, except for an occasional word. But Sol was getting it all. He reported: "He knows Walt; that's what's bothering him. He says Walt and some of the Leopards are in a basement down the street, and there's something wrong with them. I can't exactly figure out what, but--"

"The hell with them. What about that?"

"You mean the fight? Oh, it's a big one all right, Mr. Van Pelt. It's a gang called the Boomer Dukes. They've got hold of some real guns somewhere--I can't exactly understand what kind of guns he means, but it sounds like something serious. He says they shot that parapet down across the street. Gosh, Mr. Van Pelt, you'd think it'd take a cannon for something like that. But it has something to do with Walt Hutner and all the Leopards, too."

I said enthusiastically, "Very good, Sol. That's fine. Find out where the cellar is, and we'll go interview Hutner."

"But Mr. Van Pelt, the pictures--"

"Sorry. I have to call the office." I turned my back on him and headed for the car.

* * * * *

The noise was louder, and the flashes in the sky brighter--it looked as though they were moving this way. Well, I didn't have any money tied up in the car, so I wasn't worried about leaving it in the street. And somebody's cellar seemed like a very good place to be. I called the office and started to tell Harrison what we'd found out; but he stopped me short. "Sandy, where've you been? I've been trying to call you for--Listen, we got a call from Fordham. They've detected radiation coming from the East Side--it's got to be what's going on up there! Radiation, do you hear me? That means atomic weapons! Now, you get th--"

Silence.

"Hello?" I cried, and then remembered to push the talk button. "Hello? Harrison, you there?"

Silence. The two-way radio was dead.

I got out of the car; and maybe I understood what had happened to the radio and maybe I didn't. Anyway, there was something new shining in the sky. It hung below the clouds in parts, and I could see it through the bottom of the clouds in the middle; it was a silvery teacup upside down, a hemisphere over everything.

It hadn't been there two minutes before.

* * * * *

I heard firing coming closer and closer. Around a corner a bunch of cops came, running, turning, firing; running, turning and firing again. It was like the retreat from Caporetto in miniature. And what was chasing them? In a minute I saw. Coming around the corner was a kid with a lightning-blue satin jacket and two funny-looking guns in his hand; there was a silvery aura around him, the same color as the lights in the sky; and I swear I saw those cops' guns hit him twenty times in twenty seconds, but he didn't seem to notice.

Sol and the kid from the candy store were right beside me. We took another look at the one-man army that was coming down the street toward us, laughing and prancing and firing those odd-looking guns. And then the three of us got out of there, heading for the cellar. Any cellar.
I thereupon compiled two recommendations which are attached: 2, a proposal for reprimand to the Keeper of the Learning Lodge for failure to properly annotate a volume entitled U.S.A. Confidential and, 1, a proposal for reprimand to the Transport Executive, for permitting Bailey's Beam-class personnel access to temporal transport. Meanwhile, I left the "store" by a rear exit and directed myself toward the locus of the transmitting portatron.

* * * * *

I had proximately left when I received an additional information, namely that developed weapons were being employed in the area toward which I was directing. This provoked that I abandon guise entirely. I went transparent and quickly examined all aboriginals within view, to determine if any required removal; but none had observed this. I rose to perhaps seventy-five meters and sped at full atmospheric driving speed toward the source of the alarm. As I crossed a "park" I detected the drive of another Adjuster, whom I determined to be Alephplex Priam's Maw--that is, my father. He bespok me as follows: "Hurry, Besplex Priam's Maw. That crazy Foraminiferas has been captured by aboriginals and they have taken his weapons away from him." "Weapons?" I inquired. "Yes, weapons," he stated, "for Foraminiferas 9-Hart brought with him more than forty-three kilograms of weapons, ranging up to and including electronic."

I recorded this datum and we landed, went opaque in the shelter of a doorway and examined our percepts. "Quarantine?" asked my father, and I had to agree. "Quarantine," I voted, and he opened his carry-all and set-up a quarantine shield on the console. At once appeared the silvery quarantine dome, and the first step of our adjustment was completed. Now to isolate, remove, replace.

Queried Alephplex: "An Adjuster?" I observed the phenomenon to which he was referring. A young, dark aboriginal was coming toward us on the "street," driving a group of police aboriginals before him. He was armed, it appeared, with a fission-throwing weapon in one hand and some sort of tranquilizer--I deem it to have been a Stollgratz 16--in the other; moreover, he wore an invulnerability belt. The police aboriginals were attempting to strike him with missile weapons, which the belt deflected. I neutralized his shield, collapsed him and stored him in my carry-all. "Not an Adjuster," I asserted my father, but he had already perceived that this was so. I left him to neutralize and collapse the police aboriginals while I zeroed in on the portatron. I did not envy him his job with the police aboriginals, for many of them were "dead," as they say. It required the most delicate adjustments.

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The portatron developed to be in a "cellar" and with it were some nine or eleven aboriginals which it had immobilized pending my arrival. One spoke to me thus: "Young lady, please call the cops! We're stuck here, and--" I did not wait to hear what he wished to say further, but neutralized and collapsed him with the other aboriginals. The portatron apologized for having caused me inconvenience; but of course it was not its fault, so I did not neutralize it. Using it for d-f, I quickly located the culprit, Foraminiferas 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, nearby. He spoke despairingly in the dialect of the locus, "Besplex Priam's Maw, for God's sake get me out of this!" "Out!" I spoke to him, "you'll wish you never were 'born,' as they say!" I neutralized but did not collapse him, pending instructions from the Central Authority. The aboriginals who were with him, however, I did collapse.

Presently arrived Alephplex, along with four other Adjusters who had arrived before the quarantine shield made it not possible for anyone else to enter the disturbed area. Each one of us had had to abandon guise, so that this locus of Newyork 1939-1986 must require new Adjusters to replace us--a matter to be charged against the guilt of Foraminiferas 9-Hart Bailey's Beam, I deem.

* * * * *

This concluded Steps 3 and 2 of our Adjustment, the removal and the isolation of the disturbed specimens. We are transmitting same disturbed specimens to you under separate cover herewith, in neutralized and collapsed state, for the manufacture of simulacra thereof. One regrets to say that they number three thousand eight hundred forty-six, comprising all aboriginals within the quarantined area who had first-hand knowledge of the anachronisms caused by Foraminiferas's importation of contemporary weapons into this locus.

Alephplex and the four other Adjusters are at present reconstructing such physical damage as was caused by the use of said weapons. Simultaneously, while I am preparing this report, "I" am maintaining the quarantine shield which cuts off this locus, both physically and temporally, from the remainder of its environment. I deem that if replacements for the attached aboriginals can be fabricated quickly enough, there will be no significant outside percept of the shield itself, or of the happenings within it--that is, by maintaining a quasi-stasis of time while the repairs are being made, an outside aboriginal observer will see, at most, a mere flicker of silver in the sky. All Adjusters here present are working as rapidly as we can to make sure the shield can be withdrawn, before so many aboriginals have observed it as to make it necessary to replace the entire city with simulacra. We do not wish a repetition of the California incident, after all.
At first the two scientists thought the attack was a joke. And then they realized the truth!

At first two scientists thought the Indian attack on them was a joke perpetrated by some of their friends. After all, modern Indians did not attack white men any more.

Except that these did.

George Arthbut and Sidney Hunt were both out of New York, on the staff of the Natural History Museum. George was an ethnologist who specialized in what could be reconstructed about the prehistoric Indians of North America, with emphasis on those of the Southwest. He was a tall, lean, gracious bald man in his early sixties.

Sidney was an archeologist who was fascinated by the ruins of the same kind of ancient Indians. Medium-sized, with black hair that belied his sixty-five years, he and George made an excellent team, being the leaders in their field.

They had come west on a particular bit of business this spring, trying to solve the largest question that remained about the old cliff dwellers and the prehistoric desert Indians, both of whom had deserted their villages and gone elsewhere for reasons that remained a mystery.

One theory was that drought had driven them both away. Another theory ran to the effect that enemies wiped them out or made off with them as captives. Still another supposition, at least for the Hohokam desert people, the builders of Casa Grande whose impressive ruins still stood near Coolidge, had to do with their land giving out so they could no longer grow crops, forcing them to go elsewhere to find better soil.

No one really knew. It was all pure guesswork.

The two scientists meant to spend the entire summer trying to solve this riddle for all time, concentrating on it to the exclusion of everything else. They drove west in a station wagon stuffed with equipment and tracking a U-Haul-It packed with more.

George drove, on a road that was only two sand tracks across the wild empty desert between Casa Grande Monument and Tonto National Monument where cliff dwellers had lived. It was here, not far ahead, in new ruins that were being excavated, that they hoped to solve the secret of the exodus of the prehistoric Indians. The place was known as the Hohokam Dig.

They topped a rise of ground and came to the site of the dig. Here the sand tracks ended right in the middle of long trenches dug out to reveal thick adobe walls. In the partially bared ruins the outline of a small village could be seen; the detailed excavation would be done this summer by workmen who would arrive from Phoenix and Tucson.

George stopped their caravan and the two men got out, stretching their legs. They looked about, both more interested in the dig, now they were back at it, than setting up camp. They walked around, examining various parts of it, and the excitement of the promise of things to be discovered in the earth came to them. "This summer we'll learn the answer," Sidney predicted.

With skeptical hope George replied, "Maybe." It was early afternoon when they set up camp, getting out their tent from the U-Haul-It. They took out most of their gear, even setting up a portable TV set run on batteries brought along. They worked efficiently and rapidly, having done this many times before and having their equipment well organized from long experience. By the middle of the afternoon all was ready and they rested, sitting on folding chairs at a small table just outside the opening of their tent.

Looking around at the dig Sidney remarked, "Wouldn't it be easy if we could talk to some of the people who once lived here?"

"There's a few questions I'd like to ask them," said George. "I certainly wish we had some to talk with."

He had no more than uttered this casual wish than there sounded, from all sides of where they sat, screeching whoops. The naked brown men who suddenly appeared seemed to materialize from right out of the excavations. As they yelled they raised their weapons. The air was filled, for an instant, with what looked like long arrows. Most of them whistled harmlessly past the two scientists, but one hit the side of the station wagon, making a resounding thump and leaving a deep dent, while two buried themselves in the wood of the U-Haul-It and remained there, quivering.

George and Sidney, after the shock of their first surprise at this attack, leaped to their feet.
"The car!" cried Sidney. "Let's get out of here!"
They both started to move. Then George stopped and grabbed Sidney's arm. "Wait!"
"Wait?" Sidney demanded. "They'll kill us!"
"Look," advised George, indicating the red men who surrounded them; they now made no further move of attack.
George gazed about. "Oh," he said, "you think somebody's playing a joke on us?"
"Could be," said George. He ran one hand over his bald head.
"Some dear friends," Sidney went on, resenting the scare that had been thrown into them, "hired some Indians to pretend to attack us?"
"Maybe Pimas," said George. He peered at the Indians, who now were jabbering among themselves and making lamenting sounds as they glanced about at the ruins of the ancient village. There were eighteen of them. They were clad in nothing more than a curious cloth of some kind run between their legs and up and over a cord about their waists, to form a short apron, front and back.
"Or Zunis," said Sidney.
"Maybe Maricopas," said George.
"Except," Sidney observed, "none of them look like those kind of Indians. And those arrows they shot." He stared at the two sticking in the U-Haul-It. "Those aren't arrows, George--they're atlatl lances!"
"Yes," said George.
Sidney breathed, "They aren't holding bows--they've got atlatls!"
"No modern Indian of any kind," said George, "uses an atlatl."
"Most of them wouldn't even know what it was," Sidney agreed. "They haven't been used for hundreds of years; the only place you see them is in museums."

An atlatl was the weapon which had replaced the stone axe in the stone age. It was a throwing stick consisting of two parts. One was the lance, a feathered shaft up to four feet long, tipped with a stone point. The two-foot flat stick that went with this had a slot in one end and two rawhide finger loops. The lance end was fitted in the slot to be thrown. The stick was an extension of the human arm to give the lance greater force. Some atlatls had small charm stones attached to them to give them extra weight and magic.

Charm stones could be seen fastened to a few of the atlatls being held by the Indians now standing like bronze statues regarding them.
George whispered, "What do you make of it?"
"It isn't any joke," replied Sidney. He gazed tensely at the Indians. "That's all I'm sure of."
"Have you noticed their breechclouts?"
Sidney stared again. "They aren't modern clouts. George, they're right out of Hohokam culture!"
"They aren't made of cloth, either. That's plaited yucca fibre."
"Just like we've dug up many times. Only here ..." George faltered. "It's being worn by--by I don't know what."
"Look at their ornaments."
Necklaces, made of pierced colored stones, hung about many of the brown necks. Shell bracelets were to be seen, and here and there a carved piece of turquoise appeared.
"Look at the Indian over there," George urged.
Sidney looked to the side where George indicated, and croaked, "It's a girl!"
It was a girl indeed. She stood straight and magnificent in body completely bare except for the brief apron at her loins. Between her beautiful full copper breasts there hung a gleaming piece of turquoise carved in the shape of a coyote.
At her side stood a tall young Indian with a handsome face set with great pride. On her other side was a wizened little old fellow with a wrinkled face and ribs corrugated like a saguaro.
Sidney turned back and demanded, "What do you make of this? Are we seeing things?" Hopefully, he suggested, "A mirage or sort of a mutual hallucination?"
In a considered, gauging tone George replied, "They're real."
"Real?" cried Sidney. "What do you mean, real?"
"Real in a way. I mean, Sidney, these--I sound crazy to myself saying it--but I think these are--well, Sid, maybe they're actual prehistoric Indians."
"Huh?"
"Well, let's put it this way: We asked for them and we got them."
Sidney stared, shocked at George's statement. "You're crazy, all right," he said. "Hohokams in the middle of the Twentieth Century?"
"I didn't say they're Hohokams, though they probably are, of the village here."
"You said they're prehistoric," Sidney accused. He quavered, "Just how could they be?"

"Sid, you remember in our Indian studies, again and again, we meet the medicine man who has visions. Even modern ones have done things that are pretty impossible to explain. I believe they have spiritual powers beyond the capability of the white man. The prehistoric medicine men may have developed this power even more. I think the old man there is their medicine man."

"So?" Sidney invited.

"I'm just supposing now, mind you," George went on. He rubbed his bald pate again as though afraid of what thoughts were taking place under it. "Maybe way back--a good many hundreds of years ago--this medicine man decided to have a vision of the future. And it worked. And here he is now with some of his people."

"Wait a minute," Sidney objected. "So he had this vision and transported these people to this moment in time. But if it was hundreds of years ago they're already dead, been dead for a long time, so how could they--"

"Don't you see, Sid? They can be dead, but their appearance in the future--for them--couldn't occur until now because it's happened with us and we weren't living and didn't come along here at the right time until this minute."

Sidney swallowed. "Maybe," he muttered, "maybe."

"Another thing," George said. "If we can talk with them we can learn everything we've tried to know in all our work and solve in a minute what we're ready to spend the whole summer, even years, digging for."

Sidney brightened. "That's what we wanted to do."

George studied the Indians again. "I think they're just as surprised as we are. When they discovered themselves here and saw us--and you must remember we're the first white men they've ever seen--their immediate instinct was to attack. Now that we don't fight back they're waiting for us to make a move."

"What do we do?"

"Take it easy," advised George. "Don't look scared and don't look belligerent. Look friendly and hope some of the modern Indian dialects we know can make connection with them."

* * * * *

The two scientists began, at a gradual pace, to make their way toward the old man, the young man, and the girl. As they approached, the girl drew back slightly. The young man reached over his shoulder and from the furred quiver slung on his back drew an atlatl lance and fitted it to his throwing stick, holding it ready. The other warriors, all about, followed suit.

The medicine man alone stepped forward. He held up a short colored stick to which bright feathers were attached and shook it at the two white men. They stopped.

"That's his aspergill," observed Sidney. "I'd like to have that one."

The medicine man spoke. At first the scientists were puzzled, then George told Sidney, "That's Pima, or pretty close to it, just pronounced differently. It probably shows we were right in thinking the Pimas descended from these people. He wants to know who we are."

George gave their names. The medicine man replied, "The man who has white skin instead of red speaks our language in a strange way. I am Huk." He turned to the young man at his side and said, "This is Good Fox, our young chief." He indicated the girl. "That is Moon Water, his wife."

George explained what he and the other white man with him were doing here. Huk, along with all the other Indians, including Good Fox and Moon Water, listened intently; they seemed greatly excited and disturbed.

When George was finished Good Fox turned to Huk and said, "You have succeeded, wise one, in bringing us forward, far in the future to the time of these men with white skins."

"This is the truth," said the wrinkled Huk; he did not boast but rather seemed awed.

Moon Water spoke in a frightened tone. She looked about at the partially excavated ruins and asked, "But what has happened to our village?" She faltered, "Is this the way it will look in the future?"

"It is the way," Good Fox informed her sorrowfully.

"I weep for our people," she said. "I do not want to see it." She hung her pretty face over her bare body, then, in a moment, raised it resolutely.

Good Fox shook the long scraggly black hair away from his eyes and told the white men, "We did not mean to harm you. We did not know what else to do upon finding you here and our village buried."

Ignoring that in his excited interest, Sidney asked, "What year are you?"

"Year?" asked Good Fox. "What is this word?"

Both Sidney and George tried to get over to him what year meant in regard to a date in history, but Good Fox, Huk, and Moon Water, and none of the others could understand.

"We do not know what you mean," Huk said. "We know only that we live here in this village--not as you see it now--but one well built and alive with our people. As the medicine man I am known to have extra power and magic in visions. Often I have wondered what life would be like in the far future. With this group I conjured up a vision of
it, carrying them and myself to what is now here before us."

George and Sidney glanced at each other. George's lips twitched and those of Sidney trembled. George said softly to the Indians, "Let us be friends." He explained to them what they were doing here. "We are trying to find out what you were--are--like. Especially what made you desert people leave your villages."

They looked blank. Huk said, "But we have not left--except in this vision."

In an aside to George, Sidney said, "That means we've caught them before they went south or wherever they went." He turned back to Huk. "Have the cliff people yet deserted their dwellings?"

Huk nodded solemnly. "They have gone. Some of them have joined us here, and more have gone to other villages."

"We have read that into the remains of your people, especially at Casa Grande," Sidney told him. With rising excitement in his voice he asked, "Can you tell us why they left?"

Huk nodded. "This I can do."

Now the glance of Sidney and George at each other was quick, their eyes lighting.

"I'll take it down on the typewriter," Sidney said. "Think of it! Now we'll know."

He led Huk to the table set in front of the tent, where he brought out a portable typewriter and opened and set it up. He sat on one chair, and Huk, gingerly holding his aspergill before him as though to protect himself, sat on the other.

Good Fox, Moon Water and the other Indians crowded about, curious to see the machine that came alive under Sidney's fingers as Huk began to relate his story. Soon their interest wandered in favor of other things about the two men with white skin. They wanted to know about the machine with four legs.

George opened up the hood of the station wagon and showed them the engine. He sat in the car and started the motor. At the noise the Indians jumped back, alarmed, and reaching for their atlatls. Moon Water approached the rear end of the car. Her pretty nose wrinkled at the fumes coming from it and she choked, drawing back in disgust.

"It is trying to kill me," she said.

Clearly, she did not approve of an automobile.

George cut off its engine.

Over Good Fox's shoulder hung a small clay water jug hung in a plaited yucca net. George asked for a drink from it and when he tasted it and found it fresh it was wondrous to him that its water was hundreds of years old. He brought out a thermos, showing the Indians the modern version of carrying water. They tasted of its contents and exclaimed at its coolness. Good Fox held the thermos, admiring it.

"Would you like to have it?" asked George.

"You would give it to me?" the handsome young Indian asked.

"It's yours."

"Then I give you mine." He gave George his clay water jug and could not know how much more valuable it was than the thermos.

George then took them to the portable television set and turned it on. When faces, music, and words appeared the Indians jerked back, then jabbered and gathered closer to watch. A girl singer, clad in a gown that came up to her neck, caused Moon Water to inquire, "Why does she hide herself? Is she ashamed?"

The standards of modesty, George reflected as he glanced at the lovely nude form of the prehistoric Indian girl, change with the ages.

Of the people and noises on the TV screen Good Fox wanted to know quite solemnly, "Are these crazy people? Is it the way you treat your people who go crazy?"

George laughed. "You might say it's something like that."

A shout came from Sidney at the card table near the tent where he was taking down Huk's story. "George! He's just told me why the cliff people left! And why the desert people will have to leave in time. It's a reason we never thought of! It's because--"

Just then a big multi-engined plane came over, drowning out his words. The Indians stared skyward, now in great alarm. They looked about for a place to run and hide, but there was none. They held their hands over their ears and glanced fearfully at the TV which now spluttered, its picture and sound thrown off by the plane. Awesomely, they waited until the plane went over.

"We fly now in machines with wings," George explained.

"To make such a noise in the air," Moon Water said, "is wicked, destroying all peace."

"I'll agree with you there," said George.

"You have this," Good Fox observed, indicating the TV, which was now back to normal, "and you send the other through the sky to make it crazier than before." He shook his head, not comprehending.

George shut off the TV. He took up a camera of the kind that automatically finishes a picture in a minute's time.
Grouping Good Fox, Moon Water and the other warriors, he took their picture, waited, then pulled it out and showed it to them.

They cried out, one man shouting in fear, "It is great magic!"

George took a number of photographs, including several of Huk as he sat talking with Sidney. No matter what happened he would have this record as Sidney would have that he was taking down on the typewriter.

Next he showed them a pair of binoculars, teaching them how to look through them. They exclaimed and Good Fox said, "With this we could see our enemies before they see us."

"You have enemies?" George asked.

"The Apache," Good Fox said fiercely.

George handed him the binoculars. "It is yours to use against the Apache."

Solemnly the young chief answered, "The man with white skin is thanked. The red man gives in return his atlatl and lances." He held out his throwing stick and unslung his quiver of lances. George accepted them with thanks; they would be museum pieces.

Finally George showed them a rifle. He looked about for game and after some searching saw a rabbit sitting on a mound in the excavations. As he took aim Good Fox asked, "You would hunt it with your stick?"

George nodded.

"This cannot be done from here," stated one warrior.

George squeezed the trigger. Instantaneously with the explosion of the shell the rabbit jumped high and then came down, limp and dead. The Indians yelled with fright and ran off in all directions. Huk jumped up from the table. Then all stopped and cautiously returned. One went to the rabbit and picked it up, bringing it back. All, including Huk who left the table, stared with fright at it and at the rifle.

Moon Water expressed their opinion of it. "The thunder of the killing stick is evil."

"Moon Water speaks the truth," said Huk.

"It would make hunting easy," said Good Fox, "but we do not want it even if given to us."

He drew back from the rifle, and the others edged away from it.

George put it down.

Sidney held up a sheaf of papers. "I've got it all, George," he said exultantly in English, "right here! I asked Huk if they can stay with us in our time, at least for a while. We can study them more, maybe even take them back to show the world."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't have a chance to reply when you shot the rifle."

George put it formally to the Indians, addressing Huk, Good Fox, Moon Water and the rest. "You have seen something of the modern world. We would like you to stay in it if it is your wish. I don't know how long you could stay in Huk's vision, but if you can remain here permanently and not go back to your time and--well, not being alive there any more--we hope you will consider this."

Huk replied, "It is possible that we could stay in your time, at least as long as my vision lasts, which might be for as long as I lived." He glanced at Good Fox.

The young chief in turn looked at Moon Water. Her gaze went to the station wagon, to the TV, then up at the sky where the plane had appeared, at the rifle, the camera, the thermos, and all else of the white man. She seemed to weigh their values and disadvantages, looking dubious and doubtful.

Good Fox announced, "We will hold a council about it. As is our custom, all have words to say about such a thing."

Abruptly he led his people away, into the excavations and over a slight rise of ground, behind which they disappeared.

Sidney murmured, "I don't like that so much."

"They must do as they want." George led the way to the card table and they sat there. On it rested Huk's aspersill.

"He gave it to me," Sidney explained.

George placed Good Fox's netted clay water jug and his atlatl and furred quiver of lances on the table, together with the pictures he had taken of the ancient Indians. They waited.

Sidney, glancing at the low hill behind which the Indians had gone, said, "What they're doing is choosing between living in modern civilization and remaining dead. What do you think they'll do?"

"I don't know," said George. "They didn't think so much of us."

"But they couldn't choose death and complete oblivion!"

"We'll see."

They waited some more.
"At least," said Sidney, indicating the articles on the table, "we'll have these for evidence." He held up the sheaf of papers containing Huk's story. "And this, giving the real reason the cliff dwellers left. I haven't told you what it was, George. It's so simple that--"

He didn't complete his sentence, for just then Huk, Good Fox, Moon Water, and the other warriors made their choice. It was announced dramatically.

The water jug, the aspergill, and the atlatl and quiver of lances disappeared from the table. In their places, suddenly, there were the thermos and the binoculars.

Sidney stared stupidly at them.

George said quietly, "They've gone back."

"But they can't do this!" George protested.

"They have."

Sidney's hand shook as he picked up the sheaf of papers holding Huk's story. Indicating it and the photographs, he said, "Well, they haven't taken these away."

"Haven't they?" asked George. He picked up some of the pictures. "Look."

Sidney looked and saw that the pictures were now blank. His glance went quickly to the typewritten sheets of paper in his hands. He cried out and then shuffled them frantically.

They, too, were blank.

Sidney jumped up. "I don't care!" he exclaimed. "He told me and I've got it here!" He pointed to his head. "I can remember it, anyway."

"Can you?" asked George.

"Why, certainly I can," Sidney asserted confidently. "The reason the cliff dwellers left, George, was that they ..." Sidney stopped.

"What's the matter, Sid?"

"Well, I--it--I guess it just slipped my mind for a second." His brow puckered. He looked acutely upset and mystified. "Huk told me," he faltered. "Just a minute ago I was thinking of it when I started to tell you. Now ... I can't remember."

"That's gone, too."

"I'll get it!" Sidney declared. "I've just forgotten it for a minute. I'll remember!"

"No," said George, "you won't."

Sidney looked around. "There must be something left." He thought. "The atlatl lances they shot at us!" He looked at the U-Haul-It. The lances no longer stuck in its side. Nor were those that had fallen to the ground to be seen.

Sidney sat down again, heavily. "We had it all," he moaned. "Everything we'd been working for. And now ..."

"Now we'll have to dig for it again," said George. "Do it the hard way. We'll start tomorrow when the workmen come."

Sidney looked up. "There's one thing!" he cried. "The dent in the car made by the lance! It's still there, George! However everything else worked, that was forgotten. It's still there!"

George glanced at the dent in the side panel of the station wagon. "It's still there," he agreed. "But only to tell us this wasn't a dream. No one else would believe it wasn't caused by a rock."

George groaned. He stared at the rise of ground behind which the Indians had disappeared. "Huk," he pleaded. "Good Fox. Moon Water. The others. Come back, come back ..."

No one appeared over the rise of ground as the cool desert night began to close in.

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Contents

MAKE MINE HOMOGENIZED
By RICK RAPHAEL

Anyone looking for guaranteed sound science will have to look elsewhere. But if it's fun you want ... try the world's most potent eggnog!

"Shoo," Hetty Thompson cried, waving her battered old felt hat at the clucking cluster of hens eddying around her legs as she plowed through the flock towards the chicken house. "Scat. You, Solomon," she called out, directing her words at the bobbing comb of the big rooster strutting at the edge of the mob. "Don't just stand there like a
satisfied cowhand after a night in Reno. Get these noisy females outta my way." She batted at the hens and they scattered with angry squawks of protest.

Hetty paused in the doorway of the chicken house to allow her eyes to become accustomed to the cool gloom after the bright glare of the ranch yard. She could feel the first trickles of sweat forming under the man's shirt she was wearing as the hot, early morning Nevada sun beat down on her back in the doorway.

Moving carefully but quickly through the nests, she reached and groped for the eggs she knew would be found in the scattered straw. As she placed each find carefully in the bucket she carried, her lips moved in a soundless count. When she had finished, she straightened up and left the chicken house, her face reflecting minor irritation.

Again the hens swirled about her, hoping for the handfuls of cracked corn she usually tossed to them. On the other side of the yard Solomon stepped majestically along the edge of the vegetable garden, never crossing the hoed line separating garden from yard.

"You'd better stay over there, you no-account Lothario," Hetty growled. "Five eggs short this morning and all you do is act like you were just the business agent for this bunch of fugitives from a dumpling pot." Solomon cocked his head and stared Hetty down. She paused at the foot of the backporch steps and threw the rooster a final remark. "You don't do any better than this you're liable to wind up in that pot yourself." Solomon gave a scornful cluck. "Better still, I'll get me a young rooster in here and take over your job." Solomon let out a squawk and took out at a dead run, herding three hens before him towards the chicken house.

With a satisfied smile of triumph, Hetty climbed the steps and crossed to the kitchen door. She turned and looked back across the yard towards the barn and corrals.

"Barmeeeeeey," Hetty yelled. "Ain't you finished with that milking yet?"

"Comin' now, Miz Thompson," came the reply from the barn. Hetty let the screen door slam behind her as she walked into the kitchen and placed the bucket of eggs on the big work table. She had her arm up to wipe her moist forehead on the sleeve of her shirt when she spotted the golden egg lying in the middle of the others in the galvanized bucket.

She froze in the arm-lifted position for several seconds, staring at the dully glowing egg. Then she slowly reached out and picked it up. It was slightly heavier than a regular egg, but for the dull, gold-bronze metallic appearance of the shell, looked just like any of the other twenty-odd eggs in the bucket. She was still holding it in the palm of her hand when the kitchen door again slammed and the handy man limped into the room. He carried two pails of milk across the kitchen and set them down near the sink.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Miz Thompson?" Barney Hatfield asked.

Hetty frowned at the egg in her hand without answering. Barney limped around the side of the table for a closer look. Sunlight streaming through the kitchen windows glinted on the shell of the odd egg. Barney's eyes grew round. "Now ain't that something," he whispered in awe.

Hetty started as though someone had snapped their fingers in front of her staring eyes. Her normal look of practical dubiousness returned.

"Huh," she snorted. "Even had me fooled for a second. Something wrong with this egg but it sure is shootin' ain't gold. One of them fool hens must of been pecking in the fertilizer storeroom and got herself an overdose of some of them minerals in that stuff.

"What are you staring at, you old fool," she glared at Barney. "It ain't gold." Hetty laid the egg at one side of the table. She walked to the sink and took a clean, two-gallon milk can from the drainboard and set it in the sink to fill it from the pails of rich, frothy milk Barney had brought in the pails.

"Sally come fresh this morning, Miz Thompson," he said. "Got herself a real fine little bull calf."

Hetty looked at the two pails of milk. "Well, where's the rest of the milk, then?"

"That's Queenie's milk," Barney said. "Sally's is still out on the porch."

"Well bring it in before the sun clabbers it."

"Can't," Barney said.

Hetty swung around and glared at him. "What do you mean, you can't? You suddenly come down with the glanders?"

"No'm, it's just that Sally's milk ain't no good," he replied.

A frown spread over Hetty's face as she hoisted one of the milk pails and began pouring into the can in the sink. "What's wrong with it, Barney? Sally seem sick or something?" she asked.

Barney scratched his head. "I don't rightly know, Miz Thompson. That milk looks all right, or at least, almost all right. It's kinda thin and don't have no foam like you'd expect milk to have. But mostly, it sure don't smell right and it danged well don't taste right.

"Phooey." He made a face at the memory of the taste. "I stuck my finger in it when it looked kinda queer, and
took a taste. It shore tasted lousy."

"You probably been currying that mangey old horse of yours before you went to milking," Hetty snorted, "and
tasted his cancerous old hide on your fingers. I've told you for the last time to wash your hands before you go to
milking them cows. I didn't pay no eighteen hundred dollars for that prize, registered Guernsey just to have you give
her bag fever with your dirty hands."

"That ain't so, Miz Thompson," Barney cried indignantly. "I did too, wash my hands. Good, too. I wuzn't near
my horse this morning. That milk just weren't no good."

Hetty finished pouring the milk into the cans and after putting the cans in the refrigerator, wiped her hands on
her jeans and went out onto the porch, Barney trailing behind her. She bent over and sniffed at the two milk pails
setting beside the door. "Whew," she exclaimed, "it sure does smell funny. Hand me that dipper, Barney."

Barney reached for a dipper hanging on a nail beside the kitchen door. Hetty dipped out a small quantity of the
milk, sipped, straightened up with a jerk and spewed the milk out into the yard. "Yaawwwk," she spluttered, "that
tastes worse 'n Diesel oil."

She stirred distastefully at the swirling, flat-looking liquid in the pails and then turned back to the kitchen. "I
never saw the like of it," she exclaimed. "Chickens come out with some kind of sorry-looking egg and now, in
the same morning, an eighteen hundred dollar registered, fresh Guernsey gives out hogwash instead of milk." She stared
thoughtfully across the yard at the distant mountains, now shimmering in the hot, midmorning sun. "Guess we could
swill the hogs with that milk, rather'n throw it out, Barney. I never seen anything them Durocs wouldn't eat. When
you get ready to put the other swill in the cooker, toss that milk in with it and cook it up for the hogs."

Hetty went back into her kitchen and Barney turned and limped across the yard to the tractor shed. He pulled
the brim of his sweat-stained Stetson over his eyes and squinted south over the heat-dancing sage and sparse
grasslands of Circle T range. Dust devils were pirouetting in the hazy distance towards the mountains forming a
corridor leading to the ranch. A dirt road led out of the yard and crossed an oiled county road about five miles south
of the ranch. The county road was now the only link the Circle T had to the cattle shipping pens at Carson City. The
dirt road arrowed south across the range but fifteen miles from the ranch, a six-strand, new, barbed-wire fence cut
the road. A white metal sign with raised letters proclaimed "Road Closed. U.S. Government Military Reservation.
Restricted Area. Danger--Peligre. Keep Out."

The taut bands of wire stretched east and west of the road for more than twenty miles in each direction, with
duplicates of the metal sign hung on the fence every five hundred yards. Then the wires turned south for nearly a
hundred miles, etching in skin-blistering, sun-heated strands, the outlines of the Nevada atomic testing grounds at
Frenchman's Flats.

When the wire first went up, Hetty and her ranching neighbors had screamed to high heaven and high
congressmen about the loss of the road and range. The fence stayed up. Now they had gotten used to the idea and
had even grown blasé about the frequent nuclear blasts that rattled the desert floor sixty miles from ground zero.

* * * * *

Barney built a fire under the big, smoke-blackened cauldron Hetty used for cooking the hog swill. Dale
Hamilton, the county agent, had given Hetty a long talk on the dangers of feeding the pigs, raw, uncooked and
possibly contaminated, garbage. When Hamilton got graphic about what happened to people who ate pork from such
hogs, Hetty turned politely green and had Barney set up the cooking cauldron.

After dumping the kitchen slops into the pot, Barney hiked back across the yard to get the two pails of bad
milk.

Hetty was sitting at the kitchen table, putting the eggs into plastic refrigerator dishes when the hog slop
exploded in a whooshing roar, followed a split second later by an even louder blast that rocked the ranch buildings.
The eggs flew across the room as the lid of the slop cauldron came whistling through the kitchen window in a
blizzard of flying glass and buried itself, edgewise, in the wall over the stove. Hetty slammed backwards headfirst
into a heap of shattered eggs. A torrent of broken plaster, and crockery fragments rained on her stunned figure.
Through dazed eyes, she saw a column of purple-reddish fire rising from the yard.

A woman who has been thrown twenty-three times from a pitching bronco and kicked five times in the process,
doesn't stay dazed long. Pawing dripping egg yokes and plaster from her face, Hetty Thompson struggled to her feet
and staggered to the kitchen door.

"Barneeey," she bawled, "you all right?"

The column of weird-colored flame had quickly died and only a few flickering pieces of wood from the
cauldron fire burned in scattered spots about the yard. Of the cauldron, there wasn't a sign.

"Barney," she cried anxiously, "where are you?"

"Here I am, Miz Thompson." Barney's blackened face peered around the corner of the tractor shed. "You O.K.,
Miz Thompson?"
“What in thunderation happened?” Hetty called out. “You try to build a fire with dynamite for kindling?”

Shaken but otherwise unharmed, Barney painfully limped over to the ranch house porch.

“Don’t ask me what happened, m’am,” he said. “I just poured that milk into the slop pot and then put the lid back on and walked off. I heered this big ‘whoosh’ and turned around in time to see the lid fly off and the kettle begin to tip into the fire and then there was one helluva blast. It knocked me clean under the tractor shed.” He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and shakily lighted it.

Hetty peered out over the yard and then looking up, gasped. Perched like a rakish derby hat on the arm of the towering pump windmill was the slop cauldron. “Well I’ll be....” Hetty Thompson said.

“You sure you didn’t pour gas on that fire to make it burn faster, Barney Hatfield?” she barked at the handy man.

“No siree,” Barney declaimed loudly, “there weren’t no gas anywhere near that fire. Only thing I poured out was that there bad milk.” He paused and scratched his head. “Reckon that funny milk coulda done that, Miz Thompson? There ain’t no gas made what’ll blow up nor burn so funny as that did.”


“No’m, just the one bucket.” Barney pointed to the other pail beside the kitchen door, now half-empty and standing in a pool of liquid sloshed out by the blast wave. Hetty studied the milk pail for a minute and then resolutely picked it up and walked out into the yard.

“Well only one way to find out,” she said. “Get me a tin can, Barney.”

She poured about two tablespoons of the milk into the bottom of the can while Barney collected a small pile of kindling. Removing the milk pail to a safe distance, Hetty lighted the little pile of kindling, set the tin can atop the burning wood and scooted several yards away to join Barney who had been watching from afar. In less than a minute a booming whoosh sent a miniature column of purple, gaseous flame spouting from the can. “Well whadda you know about that?” Hetty exclaimed wonderingly.

The can had flown off the fire a few feet but didn’t explode. Hetty went back to the milk pail and collecting less than a teaspoon full in the water dipper, walked to the fire. Standing as far back as she could and still reach over the flames, she carefully sprinkled a few drops of the liquid directly into the fire and then jumped back. Miniature balls of purple flame erupted from the fire before she could move. Pieces of flaming kindling flew in all directions and one slammed Barney across the back of the neck and sent a shower of sparks down his back.

The handy man let out a yowl of pain and leaped for the watering trough beside the corral, smoke trailing behind him. Hetty thoughtfully surveyed the scene of her experiment from beneath raised eyebrows. Then she grunted with satisfaction, picked up the remaining milk in the pail and went back to the ranch house. Barney climbed drippingly from the horse trough.

The kitchen was a mess. Splattered eggs were over everything and broken glass, crockery and plaster covered the floor, table and counters. Only one egg remained unbroken. That was the golden egg. Hetty picked it up and shook it. There was a faint sensation of something moving inside the tough, metallic-looking shell. It shook almost as a normal egg might, but not quite. Hetty set the strange object on a shelf and turned to the task of cleaning up.

* * * * *

Johnny Culpepper, the ranch’s other full-time hand and Hetty’s assistant manager, drove the pickup into the yard just before noon. He parked in the shade of the huge cottonwood tree beside the house and bounced out with an armload of mail and newspapers. Inside the kitchen door, he dumped the mail on the sideboard and started to toss his hat on a wall hook when he noticed the condition of the room. Hetty was dishing out fragrant, warmed-over stew into three lunch dishes on the table. She had cleaned up the worst of the mess and changed into a fresh shirt and jeans. Her iron-gray hair was pulled back in a still-damp knot at the back after a hasty scrubbing to get out the gooey mixture of eggs and plaster.

“Holy smoke, Hetty,” Johnny said. “What happened here? Your pressure kettle blow up?” His eyes widened when he saw the lid of the slop cauldron still embedded in the wall over the stove. His gaze tracked back and took in the shattered window.

“Had an accident,” Hetty said matter-of-factly, putting the last dishes on the table. “Tell you about it when we eat. Now you go wash up and call Barney. I want you to put some new glass in that window this afternoon and get that danged lid outta the wall.”

Curious and puzzled, Johnny washed at the kitchen sink and then walked to the door to shout for Barney. On the other side of the yard, Barney released the pump windmill clutch. While Johnny watched from the porch, the weight of the heavy slop cauldron slowly turned the big windmill and as the arm adorned by the kettle rotated downward, the cast-iron pot slipped off and fell to the hard-packed ground with a booming clang.

“Well, for the luvva Pete,” Johnny said in amazement. “Hey, Barney, time to eat. C’mon in.”
Barney trudged across the yard and limped into the kitchen to wash. They sat down to the table. "Now just what have you two been up to," Johnny demanded as they attacked the food-laden dishes.

Between mouthfuls, the two older people gave him a rundown on the morning's mishaps. The more Johnny heard, the wilder it sounded. Johnny had been a part of the Circle T since he was ten years old. That was the year Hetty jerked him out of the hands of a Carson City policeman who had been in the process of hauling the ragged and dirty youngster to the station house for swiping a box of cookies from a grocery store. Johnny's mother was dead and his father, once the town's best mechanic, had turned into the town's best drunk.

During the times his father slept one off, either in the shack the man and boy occupied at the edge of town, or in the local lockup, Johnny ran wild.

Hetty took the boy to the ranch for two reasons. Mainly it was the empty ache in her heart since the death of Big Jim Thompson a year earlier following a ranch tractor accident that had crushed his chest. The other was her well-hidden disappointment that she had been childless. Hetty's bluff, weathered features would never admit to loneliness or heartache. Beneath the surface, all the warmth and love she had went out to the scared but belligerent youngster. But she never let much affection show through until Johnny had become part of her life. Johnny's father died the following winter after pneumonia brought on by a night of lying drunk in the cold shack during a blizzard. It was accepted without legal formality around the county that Johnny automatically became Hetty's boy.

She cuffed and comforted him into a gawky-happy adolescence, pushed him through high school and then, at eighteen, sent him off to the University of California at Davis to learn what the pundits of the United States Department of Agriculture had to say about animal husbandry and ranch management.

* * * * *

When Hetty and Barney had finished their recitation, Johnny wore a look of frank disbelief. "If I didn't know you two better, I'd say you both been belting the bourbon bottle while I was gone. But this I've got to see."

They finished lunch and, after Hetty stacked the dishes in the sink, trooped out to the porch where Johnny went through the same examination of the milk. Again, a little fire was built in the open safety of the yard and a few drops of the liquid used to produce the same technicolored, combusive effects.

"Well, what do you know," Johnny exclaimed, "a four hundred octane Guernsey cow!"

Johnny kicked out the fire and carried the milk pail to the tractor shed. He parked the milk on a workbench and gathered up an armful of tools to repair the blast-torn kitchen. He started to leave but when the milk bucket caught his eye, he unloaded the tools and fished around under the workbench for an empty five-gallon gasoline can. He poured the remaining milk into the closed gasoline can and replaced the cap. Then he took his tools and a pane of glass from an overhead rack and headed for the house.

Hetty came into the kitchen as he was prying at the cauldron lid in the wall.

"You're going to make a worse mess before you're through," she said, "so I'll just let you finish and then clean up the whole mess afterwards. I got other things to do anyway."

She jammed a man's old felt hat on her head and left the house. Barney was unloading the last of the supplies Johnny had brought from Carson in the truck. Hetty shielded her eyes against the metallic glare of the afternoon sun.

"Gettin' pretty dry, Barney. Throw some salt blocks in the pickup and I'll run them down to the south pasture and see if the pumps need to be turned on.

"And you might get that wind pump going in case we get a little breeze later this afternoon. But in any case, better run the yard pump for an hour or so and get some water up into the tank. I'll be back as soon as I take a ride through the pasture. I want to see how that Angus yearling is coming that I picked out for house beef."

A few minutes later, Hetty in the pickup disappeared behind a hot swirl of yellow dust. Barney ambled to the cool pump house beneath the towering windmill. An electric motor, powered either from the REA line or from direct current stored in a bank of wet cell batteries, bulked large in the small shed. To the left, a small, gasoline-driven generator supplied standby power if no wind was blowing to turn the arm-driven generator or if the lines happened to be down, as was often the case in the winter.

Barney threw the switch to start the pump motor. Nothing happened. He reached for the light switch to test the single bulb hanging from a cord to the ceiling. Same nothing. Muttering darkly to himself, he changed the pump engine leads to DC current and closed the switch to the battery bank. The engine squeaked and whined slowly but when Barney threw in the clutch to drive the pump, it stopped and just hummed faintly. Then he opened the AC fuse box.

Johnny had freed the cauldron lid and was knocking out bits of broken glass from the kitchen window frame before putting in the new glass when Barney limped into the room.

"That pot busted the pump house 'lectric line, Johnny, when it went sailing," he said. "Miz Thompson wants to pump up some water and on top of that, the batteries are down. You got time to fix the line?"

Johnny paused and surveyed the kitchen. "I'm going to be working here for another hour anyway so Hetty can
clean up when she gets back. Why don't you fire up the gasoline kicker for now and I'll fix the line when I get through here," he said.

"O.K.,” Barney nodded and turned to leave. "Oh, forgot to ask you. Miz Thompson tell you about the egg?"

"What egg?" Johnny asked.

"The gold one."

Johnny grinned. "Sure, and I saw the goose when I came in. And you're Jack and the windmill is your beanstalk. Go climb it, Barney and cut out the fairy tales."

"Naw, Johnny," Barney protested, "I ain't kidding. Miz Thompson got a gold egg from the hens this morning. At least, it looks kinda like gold but she says it ain't. See, here it is." He reached into the cupboard where Hetty had placed the odd egg. He walked over and handed it to Johnny who was sitting on the sink drain counter to work on the shattered window.

The younger man turned the egg over in his hand. "It sure feels funny. Wonder what the inside looks like?" He banged the egg gently against the edge of the drain board. When it didn't crack, he slammed it harder, but then realizing that if it did break suddenly, it would squish onto the floor, he put the egg on the counter and tapped it with his hammer.

The shell split and a clear liquid poured out on to the drain board, thin and clear, not glutinous like a normal egg white. A small, reddish ball, obviously the yolk, rolled across the board, fell into the sink and broke into powdery fragments. A faint etherlike odor arose from the mess.

"I guess Miz Thompson was right," Barney said. "She said that hen musta been pecking in the fertilizer chemicals. Never seen no egg like that before."

"Yeh," Johnny said puzzledly. "Well, so much for that." He tossed the golden shell to one side and turned back to his glass work. Barney left for the pumphouse.

Inside the pumphouse, Barney opened the gasoline engine tank and poked a stick down to test the fuel level. The stick came out almost dry. With another string of mutterings, he limped across the yard to the tractor shed for a gas can. Back in the pumphouse, he poured the engine tank full, set the gas can aside and then, after priming the carburetor, yanked on the starter pull rope. The engine caught with a spluttering roar and began racing madly. Barney lunged for the throttle and cut it back to idle, but even then, the engine was running at near full speed. Then Barney noticed the white fluid running down the side of the engine tank and dripping from the spout of the gasoline can. He grinned broadly, cut in the pump clutch and hurriedly limped across the yard to the kitchen.

"Hey, Johnny," he called, "did you put that milk o' Sally's into a gas can?"

Johnny leaned through the open kitchen window. "Yeh, why?"

"Well, I just filled the kicker with it by accident, and man, you orter hear that engine run," Barney exclaimed. "Come see."

Johnny swung his legs through the window and dropped lightly to the yard. The two men were halfway across the yard from the pumphouse when a loud explosion ripped the building. Parts of the pump engine flew through the thin walls like shrapnel. A billowing cloud of purple smoke welled out of the ruptured building as Johnny and Barney flattened themselves against the hot, packed earth. Flames licked up from the pump shed. The men ran for the horse trough and grabbing pails of water, raced for the pumphouse. The fire had just started into the wooden walls of the building and a few splashes of water doused the flames.

They eyed the ruins of the gasoline engine. "Holy cow," Johnny exclaimed, "that stuff blew the engine right apart." He gazed up at the holes in the pumphouse roof. "Blew the cylinders and head right out the roof. Holy cow!"

Barney was pawing at the pump and electric motor. "Didn't seem to hurt the pump none. Guess we better get that 'lectric line fixed though, now that we ain't got no more gas engine."

The two men went to work on the pump motor. The broken line outside the building was spliced and twenty minutes later, Johnny threw the AC switch. The big, electric motor spun into action and settled into a workmanlike hum. The overhead light dimmed briefly when the pump load was thrown on and then the slip-slap sound of the pump filled the shed. They watched and listened for a couple of minutes. Assured that the pump was working satisfactorily, they left the wrecked pumphouse.

Johnny was carrying the gasoline can of milk. "Good thing you set this off to one side where it didn't get hit and go off," he said. "The way this stuff reacts, we'd be without a pump, engine, or windmill if it had."

"Barney, be a good guy and finish putting in that glass for me will you? I've got the frame all ready to putty. I've got me some fiddlin' and figurin' to do." Johnny angled off to the tractor and tool shed and disappeared inside. Barney limped into the kitchen and went to work on the window glass. From the tractor shed came the sounds of an engine spluttering, racing, backfiring and then, just idling.

When Hetty drove back into the ranch yard an hour or so later, Johnny was rodeoing the farm tractor around the
yard like a teen-ager, his face split in a wide grin. She parked the truck under the tree as Johnny drove the tractor alongside and gunned the engine, still grinning.

"What in tarnation is this all about?" Hetty asked as she climbed down from the pickup.

"Know what this tractor's running on?" Johnny shouted over the noise of the engine.

"Of course I do, you young idiot," she exclaimed. "It's gasoline."

"Wrong," Johnny yelled triumphantly. "It's running on Sally's milk!"

* * * * *

The next morning, Johnny had mixed up two hundred gallons of Sally's Fuel and had the pickup, tractor, cattle truck and his 1958 Ford and Hetty's '59 Chevrolet station wagon all purring on the mixture.

Mixing it was a simple process after he experimented and found the right proportions. One quart of pure Sally's milk to one hundred gallons of water. He had used the two remaining quarts in the gasoline can to make the mixture but by morning, Sally had graced the ranch with five more gallons of the pure concentrate. Johnny carefully stored the concentrated milk in a scoured fifty-five gallon gasoline drum in the tool shed.

"We've hit a gold mine," he told Hetty exultantly. "We're never going to have to buy gasoline again. On top of that, at the rate Sally's turning this stuff out, we can start selling it in a couple of weeks and make a fortune."

That same morning, Hetty collected three more of the golden eggs.

"Set 'em on the shelf," Johnny said, "and when we go into town next time I'll have Dale look at them and maybe tell us what those hens have been into. I'll probably go into town again Saturday for the mail."

But when Saturday came, Johnny was hobbling around the ranch on a wrenched ankle, suffered when his horse stumbled in a gopher hole and tossed him.

"You stay off that leg," Hetty ordered. "I'll go into town for the mail. Them girls can just struggle along without your romancing this week." Johnny made a wry face but obeyed orders.

"Barneeey," Hetty bawled, "bring me a quarter of beef outta the cooler." Barney stuck his head out of the barn and nodded. "I been promising some good beef to Judge Hatcher for a month of Sundays now," Hetty said to Johnny.

"If you're going to stop by the courthouse, how about taking those crazy eggs of yours into the county agent's office and leave them there for analysis," Johnny suggested. He hobbled into the kitchen to get the golden eggs.

Barney arrived with the chilled quarter of beef wrapped in burlap. He tossed it in the bed of the pickup and threw more sacks over it to keep it cool under the broiling, midmorning sun. Johnny came out with the eggs in a light cardboard box stuffed with crumpled newspapers. He wedged the box against the side of beef in the forward corner of the truck bed. "One more thing, Hetty," he said. "I've got a half drum of drain oil in the tractor shed that I've been meaning to trade in for some gearbox lube that Willy Simons said he'd let me have. Can you drop it off at his station and pick up the grease?"

"Throw it on," Hetty said, "while I go change into some town clothes."

Johnny started to hobble down the porch steps when Barney stopped him. "I'll get it boy, you stay off that ankle." Barney climbed into the pickup and drove it around to the tractor shed. He spotted two oil drums in the gloomy shed. He tilted the nearest one and felt liquid slosh near the halfway mark, then rolled it out the door. Barney heaved it into the truck bed, stood it on end against the cab and drove the pickup back to the ranch house door as Hetty came out wearing clean jeans and a bright, flowered blouse. Her gray hair was tucked in a neat bun beneath a blocked Stetson hat.

She climbed into the truck, waved to the two men and drove out the yard. As she bumped over the cattle guard at the gate, the wooden plug that Johnny had jury-ripped to cork the gasoline drum with its twenty-gallon load of pure Sally's milk, bounced out.

A small geyser of white fluid shot out of the drum as she hit another bump and then the pickup went jolting down the ranch road, little splashes of Sally's milk sloshing out with each bump and forming a pool on the bottom of the truck. When Hetty cowboyed onto the county road, the drum tipped dangerously and then bounced back onto its base. This time a fountain of milk geysered out and splashed heavily into the box of golden eggs. Hetty drove on.

But not for long.

With a ranch woman's disregard for watching the road, Hetty constantly scanned the nearby range lands where small bands of her cherished black Angus grazed. She prided herself on the fact that despite her sixty years, her eyes were still sharp enough to spot a worm-ridden cow at a thousand yards.

Two miles after she turned onto the county road, which ran through Circle T range land, her roving gaze took in a cow and calf on a hillside a few hundred yards south of the road. Hetty slowed the pickup to fifty miles an hour and squinted into the sun. She gazed with satisfaction and slammed on the brakes. The truck swerved and skidded to a halt at the left side of the deserted road. Hetty leaped from the truck and began a fast walk up the hillside for a closer look at the cow and calf.
She never heard the dull thump of the milk drum tipping onto the edge of the truck bed. Hetty topped the hill and walked slowly towards the cow and calf that were now edging away from her. As she eased down the far side of the hill out of sight of the pickup, a steady stream of Sally's milk was engulfing the box of golden eggs. A minute later, the reduced contents caused the drum to shift and slip. It fell onto the eggs, cracking a half dozen.

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The earth split open and the world around Hetty erupted in a roaring inferno of purple-red fire and ear-shattering sound. The rolling concussion swept Hetty from her feet and tumbled her into a drywash gully at the base of the hill. The gully saved her life as the sky-splitting shock wave rolled over her. Stunned and deafened, she flattened herself under a slight overhang.

The rolling blast rocked ranches and towns for more than one hundred miles and the ground wave triggered the seismographs at the University of California nearly two hundred miles away and at UCLA, four hundred miles distant. Tracking and testing instruments went wild along the entire length of the AEC atomic test grounds, a mere sixty miles south of the smoking, gaping hole that marked the end of the Circle T pickup truck.

In a direct line, the ranch house was about eight miles from the explosion.

Johnny was lounging in Hetty's favorite rocking chair on the wide back verandah, lighting a cigarette and Barney was perched on the porch railing when the sky was blotted out by the dazzling violet light of the blast. They were blinking in frozen amazement when the shock wave smashed into the ranch, flattening the flimsier buildings and buckling the side and roof of the steel-braced barn. Every window on the place blew out in a storm of deadly glass shards. The rolling ground wave in the wake of the shock blast, rocked and bounced the solid, timber and adobe main house.

The concussion hit Johnny like a fist, pinwheeling him backwards in the rocker against the wall of the house. It caught Barney like a sack of sodden rags and flung him atop the dazed and semiconscious younger man.

The first frightened screams of the horses in the barns and corrals were mingling with the bawling of the heifers in the calf pens when the sound of the explosion caught up with the devastation of the shock and ground waves.

Like the reverberation of a thousand massed cannon firing at once, the soul-searing sound rumbled out of the desert and boiled with almost tangible density into the shattered ranch yard. It flattened the feebly-stirring men on the porch and then thundered on in a tidal wave of noise.

Barney moaned and rolled off the tangle of porch rocker and stunned youth beneath him. Johnny lay dazed another second or two and then began struggling to his feet.

"Hetty," he croaked, pointing wildly to the south where a massive, dirty column of purple smoke and fire rose skyward like the stem of a monstrous and malignant toadstool. "Hetty's out there."

He stumbled from the porch and broke into a staggering run to the pile of broken planks that seconds ago had been the tractor shed. As he crossed the yard, a great gust of wind whipped back from the north, pumping clouds of dry, dusty earth before it. The force of the wind almost knocked the bruised and shaken Johnny from his feet once again as it swept back over the ranch, in the direction of the great pillar of purple smoke.

"Implosion," Johnny's mind registered.

He tore at the stack of loose boards leaning against the station wagon, flinging them fiercely aside in his frantic efforts to free the vehicle. Barney limped up to join him and a minute later they had cleared a way into the wagon. Johnny squeezed into the front seat and drove it back from under more leaning boards. Three of the side windows were smashed but the windshield was intact except for a small, starred crack in the safety glass. Clear of the debris, Barney opened the opposite door and slid in beside Johnny. Dirt spun from beneath the wheels of the car as he slammed his foot to the floor and raced towards the smoke column that now towered more than a mile and a half into the air.

Beneath her protective overhang, Hetty stirred and moaned feebly. Twin rivulets of dark blood trickled from her nostrils. Thick dust was settling on the area and she coughed and gasped for breath.

On the opposite side of the hill, a vast, torn crater, nearly a hundred feet across and six to ten feet deep, smoked like a stirring volcano and gave off a strange, pungent odor of ether.

* * * * *

Johnny Culpepper's dramatic charge to the rescue was no more dramatic than the reaction in a dozen other places in Nevada and California. Particularly sixty miles south where a small army of military and scientific men were preparing for an atomic underground shot when the Circle T pickup vanished.

The shock wave rippled across the desert floor, flowed around the mountains and tunneled into Frenchman's Flat, setting off every shock-measuring instrument. Then came the ground wave, rolling through the earth like a gopher through a garden. Ditto for ground-wave measuring devices. Lastly, the sound boomed onto the startled scientists and soldiers like the pounding of great timpani under the vaulted dome of the burning sky.

On mountain top observation posts, technicians turned unbelieving eyes north to the burgeoning pillar of smoke
and dust, then yelped and swung optical and electronic instruments to bear on the fantastic column.

In less than fifteen minutes, the test under preparation had been canceled, all equipment secured and the first assault waves of scientists, soldiers, intelligence and security men were racing north behind white-suited and sealed radiation detection teams cradling Geiger counters in their arms like submachine guns. Telephone lines were jammed with calls from Atomic Energy Commission field officials reporting the phenomena to Washington and calling for aid from West Coast and New Mexico AEC bases. Jet fighters at Nellis Air Force base near Las Vegas, were scrambled and roared north over the ground vehicles to report visual conditions near the purple pillar of power.

The Associated Press office in San Francisco had just received word of the quake recorded by the seismograph at Berkeley when a staffer on the other side of the desk answered a call from the AP stringer in Carson City, reporting the blast and mighty cloud in the desert sky. One fast look at the map showed that the explosion was well north of the AEC testing ground limits. The Carson City stringer was ordered to get out to the scene on the double and hold the fort while reinforcements of staffers and photographers were flown from 'Frisco.

Before any of the official or civil agencies had swung into action, the Circle T station wagon had rocketed off the ranch road and turned onto the oiled, county highway leading both to Carson City--and the now-expanding but less dense column of smoke.

Johnny hunched over the wheel and peered through the thickening pall of smoke and dust, reluctant to ease off his breakneck speed but knowing that they had to find Hetty--if she were alive. Neither man had said a word since the wagon raced from the ranch yard.

* * * * *

There was no valid reason to associate the explosion with Hetty, yet instinctively and naggingly, Johnny knew that somehow Hetty was involved. Barney, still ignorant of his error of the oil drums, just clung to his seat and prayed for the best.

The dust was almost too thick to see, forcing Johnny to slow the station wagon as they penetrated deeper into the base of the smoke column. Hiding under his frantic concern for Hetty was the half-formed thought that the whole thing was an atomic explosion and that he and Barney were heading into sure radiation deaths. His logic nudged at the thought and said, "If it were atomic, you started dying back on the porch, so might as well play the game out."

A puff of wind swirled the dust up away from the road as the station wagon came up to the smoking crater. Johnny slammed on the brakes and he and Barney jumped from the car to stand, awe-struck, at the edge of the hole. The dust-deadened air muffled Johnny's sobbing exclamation:

"Dear God!"

They walked slowly around the ragged edges of the crater. Barney bent down and picked a tiny metallic fragment from the pavement. He stared at it and then tapped Johnny on the arm and handed it to him, wordlessly. It was a twisted piece of body steel, bright at its torn edges and coated with the scarlet enamel that had been the color of the Circle T pickup.

Johnny's eyes filled with tears and he shoved the little scrap of metal in his pocket. "Let's see what else we can find, Barney." The two men began working a slow search of the area in ever-widening circles from the crater that led them finally up and over the top of the little hill to the south of the road.

Fifteen minutes later they found Hetty and ten minutes after that, the wiry, resilient ranchwoman was sitting between them on the seat of the station wagon, explaining how she happened to be clear of the pickup when the blast occurred.

The suspicion that had been growing in Johnny's mind, now brought into the open by his relief at finding Hetty alive and virtually unhurt, bloomed into full flower.

"Barney," Johnny asked softly, "which oil drum did you put in the back of the pickup?"

The facts were falling into place like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle when the Carson City reporter, leading a caravan of cars and emergency vehicles from town by a good ten minutes and beating the AEC and military teams by twenty minutes, found the Circle T trio sitting in the station wagon at the lip of the now faintly smoldering crater.

A half hour later, the AP man in San Francisco picked up the phone.

"I've just come back from that explosion," the Carson City stringer said. The AP man put his hand over the phone and called across the desk. "Get ready for a '95' first lead blast."

"O.K.,” the San Francisco desk man said, "let's have it." He tucked the phone between chin and shoulder and poised over his typewriter.

"Well, there's a crater more than one hundred feet across and ten feet deep," the Carson City stringer dutifully recounted. "The scene is on County Road 38, about forty miles east of here and the blast rocked Carson City and caused extensive breakage for miles around."

"What caused it," the AP desk man asked as he pounded out a lead.
"A lady at the scene said her milk and eggs blew up," the Carson City stringer said.

* * * * *

Ten miles south, the leading AEC disaster truck stopped behind the six-strand fence blocking the range road. Two men with wire cutters, jumped from the truck and snipped the twanging wires. The metal "Keep Out" sign banged to the ground and was kicked aside. The truck rolled through the gap and the men swung aboard. Behind them was a curtain of dust rising sluggishly in the hot sky, marking the long convoy of other official vehicles pressing hard on the trail of the emergency truck.

When the range road cut across the county highway, the driver paused long enough to see that the heaviest smoke concentrations from the unknown blast lay to the west. He swung left onto the oiled road and barreled westward. In less than a mile, he spied the flashing red light of a State trooper's car parked in the center of the road. The scene looked like a combination of the San Francisco quake and the Los Angeles county fair.

Dozens of cars, trucks, two fire engines and a Good Humor man were scattered around the open range land on both sides of the vast crater still smoldering in the road. A film of purple dust covered the immediate area and still hung in the air, coating cars and people. Scores of men, women and children lined the rim of the crater, gawking into the smoky pit, while other scores roamed aimlessly around the nearby hill and desert.

A young sheriff's deputy standing beside the State trooper's car raised his hand to halt the AEC disaster van. The truck stopped and the white-suited radiation team leaped from the vehicle, counters in hand, racing for the crater.

"Back," the chief of the squad yelled at the top of his lungs. "Everybody get back. This area is radiation contaminated. Hurry!"

There was a second of stunned comprehension and then a mad, pan-demonic scrambling of persons and cars, bumping and jockeying to flee. The radiation team fanned out around the crater, fumbling at the level scales on their counters when the instruments failed to indicate anything more than normal background count.

All of the vehicles had pulled back to safety—all except a slightly battered station wagon still parked a yard or two from the eastern edge of the crater.

The radiation squad leader ran over to the wagon. Three people, two men and a dirty, disheveled and bloody-nosed older woman, sat in the front seat munching Good Humor bars.

"Didn't you hear me?" the AEC man yelled. "Get outta here. This area's hot. Radioactive. Dangerous. GET MOVING!"

The woman leaned out the window and patted the radiation expert soothingly on the shoulder.

"Shucks, sonny, no need to get this excited over a little spilt milk."

"Milk," the AEC man yelped, purpling. "Milk! I said this is a hot area; it's loaded with radiation. Look at this--" He pointed to the meter on his counter, then stopped, gawked at the instrument and shook it. And stared again. The meter flicked placidly along at the barely-above-normal background level count.

"Hey, Jack," one of the other white-suited men on the far side of the crater called, "this hole doesn't register a thing."

The squad chief stared incredulously at his counter and banged it against the side of the station wagon. Still the needle held in the normal zone. He banged it harder and suddenly the needle dropped to zero as Hetty and her ranch hands peered over the AEC man's shoulder at the dial.

"Now ain't that a shame," Barney said sympathetically. "You done broke it."

The rest of the disaster squad, helmets off in the blazing sun and lead-coated suits unfastened, drifted back to the squad leader at the Circle T station wagon. A mile east, the rest of the AEC convoy had arrived and halted in a huge fan of vehicles, parked a safe distance from the crater. A line of more white-suited detection experts moved cautiously forward.

With a stunned look, the first squad leader turned and walked slowly down the road towards the approaching line. He stopped once and looked back at the gaping hole, down at his useless counter, shook his head and continued on to meet the advancing units.

By nightfall, new strands of barbed wire reflected the last rays of the red Nevada sun. Armed military policemen and AEC security police in powder-blue battle jackets, patrolled the fences around the county road crater. And around the fence that now enclosed the immediate vicinity of the Circle T ranch buildings. Floodlights bathed the wire and cast an eerie glow over the mass of parked cars and persons jammed outside the fence. A small helicopter sat off to the right of the impromptu parking lot and an NBC newscaster gave the world a verbal description of the scene while he tried to talk above the snorting of the gas-powered generator that was supplying the Associated Press radio-telephone link to San Francisco.

Black AEC vans and dun colored military vehicles raced to and from the ranch headquarters, pausing to be cleared by the sentries guarding the main gates.
The AP log recorded one hundred eighteen major daily papers using the AP story that afternoon and the following morning:

CARSON CITY, NEV., May 12 (AP)--A kiloton eggnog rocked the scientific world this morning.

"On a Nevada ranch, forty miles east of here, 60-year-old Mehatibel Thompson is milking a cow that gives milk more powerful than an atomic bomb. Her chickens are laying the triggering mechanisms.

"This the world learned today when an earth-shaking explosion rocked...."

* * * * *

Inside the Circle T ranch house, Hetty, bathed and cleaned and only slightly the worse for her experiences, was hustling about the kitchen throwing together a hasty meal. Johnny and Barney had swept up a huge pile of broken glass, crockery and dirt and Hetty had salvaged what dishes remained unshattered by the blast.

She weaved through a dozen men grouped around the kitchen table, some in military or security police garb, three of them wearing the uniform of the atomic scientist in the field--bright Hawaiian sports shirts, dark glasses, blue denims and sneakers. Johnny and Barney huddled against the kitchen drainboard out of the main stream of traffic. The final editions of the San Francisco Call-Bulletin, Oakland Tribune, Los Angeles Herald-Express and the Carson City Appeal were spread out on the table. Hetty pushed them aside to put down dishes.

The glaring black headlines stared up at her. "Dairy Detonation Devastates Desert," the alliterative Chronicle banner read; "Bossy's Blast Rocks Bay Area," said the Trib; "Atomic Butter-And-Egg Blast Jars LA," the somewhat inaccurate Herald-Ex proclaimed; "Thompson Ranch Scene of Explosion," the Appeal stated, hewing to solid facts.

"Mrs. Thompson," the oldest of the scientists said, "won't you please put down those dishes for a few minutes and give us the straight story. All afternoon long its been one thing or another with you and all we've been able to get out of you is this crazy milk-egg routine."

"Time enough to talk after we've all had a bite to eat," Hetty said, juggling a platter of steaks and a huge bowl of mashed potatoes to the table. "Now we've all had a hard day and we can all stand to get on the outside of some solid food. I ain't had a bite to eat since this morning and I guess you boys haven't had much either. And since you've seemed to have made yourselves to home here, then by golly, you're going to sit down and eat with us.

"Besides," she added over her shoulder as she went back to the stove for vegetables and bread, "me 'n Johnny have already told you what story there is to tell. That's all there is to it."

She put more platters on the now-heaping table and then went around the table pouring coffee from the big ranch pot. "All right, you men sit down now and dig in," she ordered.

"Mrs. Thompson," an Army major with a heavy brush mustache said, "we didn't come here to eat. We came for information."

Hetty shoved back a stray wisp of hair and glared at the man.

"Now you listen to me, you young whippersnapper. I didn't invite you, but since you're here, you'll do me the goodness of being a mite more polite," she snapped.

The major winced and glanced at the senior scientist. The older man raised his eyes expressively and shrugged. He moved to the table and sat down. There was a general scuffling of chairs and the rest of the group took places around the big table. Johnny and Barney took their usual flanking positions beside Hetty at the head of the board.

Hetty took her seat and looked around the table with a pleased smile. "Now that's more like it."

She bowed her head and, after a startled glance, the strangers followed suit.

"We thank Thee, dear Lord," Hetty said quietly, "for this food which we are about to eat and for all Your help to us this day. It's been a little rough in spots but I reckon You've got Your reasons for all of it. Seein' as how tomorrow is Your day anyway, we ask that it be just a mite quieter. Amen."

The satisfying clatter of chinaware and silver and polite muttered requests for more potatoes and gravy filled the kitchen for the next quarter of an hour as the hungry men went to work on the prime Circle T yearling beef.

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After his second steak, third helping of potatoes and gravy and fourth cup of coffee, the senior scientist contentedly shoved back from the table. Hetty was polishing the last dabs of gravy from her plate with a scrap of bread. The scientist pulled a pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket.

"With your permission, m'am," he asked his hostess. Hetty grinned. "For heaven's sake, fire it up, sonny. Big Jim--that was my husband--used to say that no meal could be said properly finished unless it had been smoked into position for digestion."

Several of the other men at the table followed suit with pipes, cigars and cigarettes. Hetty smiled benignly around the table and turned to the senior scientist.

"What did you say your name was, sonny?" she asked.

"Dr. Floyd Peterson, Mrs. Thompson," he replied, "and at forty-six years of age, I deeply thank you for that 'sonny.'"
He reached for the stack of newspapers on the floor beside his chair and pushing back his plate, laid them on the table.

"Now, Mrs. Thompson, let's get down to facts," he rapped the headlines with a knuckle. "You have played hell with our schedule and I've got to have the answers soon before I have the full atomic commission and a congressional investigation breathing down my neck.

"What did you use to make that junior grade earthquake?"

"Why, I've already told you more'n a dozen times, sonny," Hetty replied. "It must of been the combination of them queer eggs and Sally's milk."

The brush-mustached major sipping his coffee, spluttered and choked. Beside him, the head of the AEC security force at Frenchman's Flat leaned forward.

"Mrs. Thompson, I don't know what your motives are but until I find out, I'm deeply thankful that you gave those news hounds this ... this, butter and egg business," he said.

"Milk and eggs," Hetty corrected him mildly.

"Well, milk and eggs, then. But the time has ended for playing games. We must know what caused that explosion and you and Mr. Culpepper and Mr. Hatfield," he nodded to Johnny and Barney sitting beside Hetty, "are the only ones who can tell us."


"Look, Mrs. Thompson," Dr. Peterson said loudly and with ill-concealed exasperation, "you created and set off an explosive force that dwarfed every test we've made at Frenchman's Flat in four years. The force of your explosive was apparently greater than that of a fair-sized atomic device and only our Pacific tests—and those of the Russians—have been any greater. Yet within a half hour or forty-five minutes after the blast there wasn't a trace of radiation at ground level, no aerial radiation and not one report of upper atmosphere contamination or fallout within a thousand miles.

"Mrs. Thompson, I appeal to your patriotism. Your friends, your country, the free people of the world, need this invention of yours."

Hetty's eyes grew wide and then her features set in a mold of firm determination. Shoving back her chair and raising to stand stiffly erect and with chin thrust forward, she was every inch the True Pioneer Woman of the West.

"I never thought of that," she said solemnly. "By golly, if my country needs this like that, then by golly, my country's going to have it."

The officials leaned forward in anticipation.

"You can have Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III and I don't want one cent for her, either. And you can take the hens, too."

There was a stunned silence and then the Army major strangled on a mouthful of coffee; the security man turned beet red in the face and Dr. Peterson's jaw bounced off his breastbone. Johnny, unable to hold back an explosion of laughter, dashed for the back porch and collapsed.

* * * * *

The kitchen door slammed and Dr. Peterson stamped out on to the porch, pipe clamped between clenched teeth, his face black with anger and frustration. He ignored Johnny who was standing beside the rail wiping tears from his eyes. Culpepper recovered himself and walked over to the irate physicist.

"Dr. Peterson you're a man of science," Johnny said, "and a scientist is supposed to be willing to accept a fact and then, possibly determine the causes behind the fact after he recognizes what he sees. Isn't that so?"

"Now, look here," Peterson angrily swung around to face Johnny. "I've taken all I intend to take from you people with your idiotic story. I don't intend to...."

Johnny took the older man by the elbow and gently but firmly propelled him from the porch towards the barn. "I don't intend to either insult your intelligence, Dr. Peterson, or attempt to explain what has happened here. But I do intend to show you what we know."

Bright floodlights illuminated the yard and a crew of soldiers were stringing telephone wires from the guarded front gate across the open space to the ranch house. Beyond the new barbed wire fence, there was an excited stir and rush for the wire as a sharp-eyed newsmen spotted Johnny and the scientist crossing the yard. The two men ignored the shouted requests for more up-to-the-minute information as they walked into the barn. Johnny switched on the lights.

The lowing of the two prize Guernseys in the stalls at the right of the door changed to loud, plaintive bawling as the lights came on. Both cows were obviously in pain from their swollen and unmilked udders.

"Seeing is believing, Doc?" Johnny asked, pointing to the cows.

"Seeing what?" Peterson snapped.

"I knew we were going to have some tall explaining to do when you fellows took over here," Johnny said, "and,
of course, I don't blame you one bit. That was some blast Hetty set off out there."

"You don't know," Dr. Peterson murmured fearfully, "you just don't know."

"So," Johnny continued, "I deliberately didn't milk these cows, so that you could see for yourself that we aren't lying. Now, mind you, I don't have the foggiest idea WHY this is happening, but I'm going to show you at least, WHAT happened."

He picked up a pair of milk buckets from a rack beside the door and walked towards the cow stalls, Peterson trailing. "This," Johnny said, pointing to the larger of the two animals, "is Queenie. Her milk is just about as fine as you can get from a champion milk producing line. And this," he reached over and patted the flank of the other cow, "is Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III. She's young and up to now has given good but not spectacular quantities or qualities of milk. She's from the same blood line as Queenie. Sally had dried up from her first calf and we bred her again and on Wednesday she came fresh. Only it isn't milk that she's been giving. Watch!"

Kicking a milking stool into position, he placed a bucket under Queenie's distended bag and began squirting the rich, foaming milk into the pail with a steady, fast and even rhythm. When he had finished, he set the two full buckets with their thick heads of milk foam, outside the stall and brought two more clean, empty buckets. He moved to the side of the impatient Sally. As Peterson watched, Johnny filled the buckets with the same, flat, oily-looking white fluid that Sally had been producing since Wednesday. The scientist began to show mild interest.

Johnny finished, stripped the cow, and then carried the pails out and set them down beside the first two.

"O.K., now look them over yourself," he told Peterson.

The scientist peered into the buckets. Johnny handed him a ladle.

"Look, Culpepper," Peterson said, "I'm a physicist, not a farmer or an agricultural expert. How do you expect me to know what milk is supposed to do? Until I was fifteen years old, I thought the milk came out of one of those spigots and the cream out of another."

"Stir it," Johnny ordered. The scientist took the ladle angrily and poked at the milk in Queenie's buckets.

"Taste it," Johnny said. Peterson stared at the younger man and then took a careful sip of the milk. Some of the froth clung to his lips and he licked it off. "Taste like milk to me," he said.


"O.K., now do the same things to the other buckets."

Peterson swished the ladle through the buckets containing Sally's milk. The white liquid swirled sluggishly and oillike. He bent over and smelled and made a grimace.

"Go on," Johnny demanded, "taste it."

Peterson took a tiny sip, tasted and then spat.

"All right," he said, "I'm now convinced that there's something different about this milk. I'm not saying anything is wrong with it because I wouldn't know. All I'm admitting is that it is different. So what?"

** * * * *

"Come on," Johnny took the ladle from him. He carried the buckets of Queenie's milk into the cooler room and dumped them in a small pasturizer.

Then carrying the two pails of Sally's milk, Johnny and the physicist left the barn and went to the shattered remains of the tractor shed.

Fumbling under wrecked and overturned tables and workbenches, Johnny found an old and rusted pie tin.

Placing the tin in the middle of the open spaces of the yard, he turned to Peterson. "Now you take that pail of milk and pour a little into the pan. Not much, now, just about enough to cover the bottom or a little more." He again handed the ladle to Peterson.

The scientist dipped out a small quantity of the white fluid and carefully poured it into the pie plate.

"That's enough," Johnny cautioned. "Now let's set these buckets a good long ways from here." He picked up the buckets and carried them to the back porch. He vanished into the kitchen.

By this time, the strange antics of the two men had attracted the attention of the clamoring newsmen outside the fence and they jammed against the wire, shouting pleas for an interview or information. The network television camera crews trained their own high-powered lights into the yard to add to the brilliance of the military lights and began recording the scene. Dr. Peterson glared angrily at the mob and turned as Johnny rejoined him. "Culpepper, are you trying to make a fool of me?" he hissed.

"Got a match?" Johnny queried, ignoring the question. The pipe-smoking scientist pulled out a handful of kitchen matches. Johnny produced a glass fish casting rod with a small wad of cloth tied to the weighted hook. Leading Peterson back across the yard about fifty feet, Johnny handed the rag to Peterson.

"Smell it," he said. "I put a little kerosene on it so it would burn when it goes through the air." Peterson nodded.

"You much of a fisherman?" Johnny asked.

"I can drop a fly on a floating chip at fifty yards," the physicist said proudly. Johnny handed him the rod and
"O.K., Doc, light up your rag and then let's see you drop it in that pie plate."

While TV cameras hummed and dozens of still photographers pointed telescopic lenses and prayed for enough light, Dr. Peterson ignited the little wad of cloth. He peered behind to check for obstructions and then, with the wrist-flicking motion of the devoted and expert fisherman, made his cast. The tiny torch made a blurred, whipping streak of light and dropped unerringly into the pie plate in the middle of the yard.

The photographers had all the light they needed!

The night turned violet as a violent ball of purple fire reared and boiled into the darkened sky. The flash bathed the entire ranch headquarters and the packed cars and throngs outside the fence in the strange brilliance. The heat struck the dumfounded scientist and young rancher like the suddenly-opened door of a blast furnace.

It was over in a second as the fire surged and then winked out. The sudden darkness blinded them despite the unchanged power of the television and military floodlights still focused on the yard. Pandemonium erupted from the ranks of newsmen and photographers who had witnessed the dazzling demonstration.

Peterson stared in awe at the slightly smoking and warped pie tin. "Well, cut out my tongue and call me Oppenheimer," he exclaimed.

"That was just the milk," Johnny said. "You know of a good safe place we could try it out with one of those eggs? I'd be afraid to test 'em anywhere around here after what happened to Hetty this morning."

* * * * *

An hour later, a military helicopter chewed its way into the night, carrying three gallons of Sally's milk from the ranch to Nellis AFB where a jet stood ready to relay the sealed cannister to the AEC laboratories at Albuquerque.

In the ranch house living room Peterson had set up headquarters and an Army field telephone switchboard was in operation across the room.

An AEC security man was running the board. Hetty had decided that one earthquake a day was enough and had gone to bed. Barney bewildered but happily pleased at so much company, sat on the edge of a chair and avidly watched and listened, not understanding a thing he saw or heard. At the back of the room, Johnny hunched over Big Jim Thompson's roll-top desk, working up a list of supplies he would need to repair the damages from the week's growing list of explosions.

Peterson and three of his staff members were in lengthy consultation at a big table in the middle of the room. The Army field phone at Peterson's elbow jangled.

Across the room, the switchboard operator swung around and called: "It's the commissioner, Dr. Peterson. I just got through to him." Peterson picked up the phone.

"John," he shouted into the instrument, "Peterson here. Where have you been?" Tinny, audible squawks came from the phone and Peterson held it away from his ear.

"Yes, I know all about it," he said. "Yes ... yes ... yes. I know you've had a time with the papers. Yes, I heard the radio. Yes, John, I know it sounds pretty ridiculous. What? Get up to the ranch and find out. Where do you think I'm calling from?"

The squawking rattled the receiver and Peterson winced.

"Look, commissioner," he broke in, "I can't put a stop to those stories. What? I said I can't put a stop to the stories for one reason. They're true."

The only sound that came from the phone was the steady hum of the line.

"Are you there, John?" Peterson asked. There was an indistinct mumble from Washington. "Now listen carefully, John. What I need out here just as quickly as you can round them up and get them aboard a plane is the best team of biogeneticists in the country.

"What? No, I don't need a team of psychiatrists, commissioner. I am perfectly normal." Peterson paused. "I think!"

He talked with his chief for another fifteen minutes. At two other telephones around the big table, his chief deputy and the senior security officer of the task force handled a half dozen calls during Peterson's lengthy conversation. When Peterson hung up, the machinery was in motion gathering the nation's top biochemists, animal geneticists, agricultural and animal husbandry experts and a baker's dozen of other assorted -ists, ready to package and ship them by plane and train to the main AEC facility at Frenchman's Flat and to the Circle T.

Peterson sighed gustily as he laid down the phone and reached for his pipe. Across the table, his assistant put a hand over the mouthpiece of his telephone and leaned towards Peterson.

"It's the Associated Press in New York," he whispered. "They're hotter than a pistol about the blackout and threatening to call the President and every congressman in Washington if we don't crack loose with something."

"Why couldn't I have flunked Algebra Two," Peterson moaned. "No, I had to be a genius. Now look at me. A milkmaid." He looked at his watch. "Tell 'em we'll hold a press conference at 8:00 a.m. outside the ranch gate."
The assistant spoke briefly into the phone and again turned to Peterson. "They say they want to know now whether the milk and egg story is true. They say they haven't had anything but an official runaround and a lot of rumor."

"Tell them we neither deny nor confirm the story. Say we are investigating. We'll give them a formal statement in the morning," Peterson ordered.

He left the table and walked to the desk where Johnny was finishing his list of building supplies.

"What time do you usually get those eggs?" he asked.

"Well, as a rule, Hetty gets out and gathers them up about nine each morning. But they've probably been laid a couple of hours earlier.

"That's going to make us awfully late to produce anything for those babbling reporters," the scientist said.

"Come to think of it," Johnny said thoughtfully, "we could rig up a light in the chicken house and make the hens lay earlier. That way you could have some eggs about four or five o'clock in the morning."

Barney had been listening.

"And them eggs make a mighty fine breakfast of a morning," he volunteered cheerfully. Peterson glared at him and Johnny grinned.

"I think the doctor wants the golden kind," he said with a smile.

"Oh, them," Barney said with a snort of disgust. "They wouldn't make an omelet fit for a hog. You don't want to fuss with them, doc."

* * * * *

Under Johnny's direction, a crew of technicians ran a power line into the slightly-wrecked chicken house. There were loud squawks of indignation from the sleeping hens as the men threaded their way through the nests. The line was installed and the power applied. A one-hundred-fifty-watt bulb illuminated the interior of the chicken house to the discordant clucking and cackling of the puzzled birds.

Solomon, the big rooster, was perched on a crossbeam, head tucked under his wing. When the light flooded the shed he jerked awake and fastened a startled and unblinking stare at the strange sun. He scrambled hastily and guiltily to his feet and throwing out his great chest, crowed a shrieking hymn to Thomas A. Edison. Johnny chuckled as the technicians jumped at the sound. He left the hen house, went back to the house and to bed.

He set his alarm clock for 4:00 a.m. and dropped immediately into a deep and exhausted sleep.

When he and the sleepy-eyed Peterson went into the chicken house at 4:30, there were eleven of the golden eggs resting on the straw nests.

They turned the remainder of the normal eggs over to Hetty who whipped up a fast and enormous breakfast. While Peterson and Johnny were eating, a writing team of AEC public information men who had arrived during the night, were polishing a formal press release to be given to the waiting reporters at eight. The phones had been manned throughout the night. Peterson's bleary-eyed aide came into the kitchen and slumped into a chair at the table.

"Get yourself a cup of coffee, boy," Hetty ordered, "while I fix you something to eat. How you like your eggs?"

"Over easy, Mrs. Thompson and thanks," he said wearily. "I think I've got everything lined up, doctor. The eggs are all packed, ready to go in your car and the car will be ready in about ten minutes. They're still setting up down range but they should be all in order by the time you get there.

"The bio men and the others should be assembled in the main briefing room at range headquarters. I've ordered a double guard around the barn, to be maintained until the animal boys have finished their on-the-ground tests. And they're padding a device van to take Sally to the labs when they're ready.

"And... oh yeah, I almost forgot... the commissioner called about ten minutes ago and said to tell you that the Russians are going to make a formal protest to the U.N. this morning. They say we're trying to wipe out the People's Republic by contaminating their milk."

The sound of scuffling in the yard and loud yells of protest came through the back porch window. The door swung open and a spluttering and irate Barney was thrust into the room, still in the clutches of a pair of armed security policemen.

"Get your hands off'n me," Barney roared as he struggled and squirmed impotently in their grip. "Doc, tell these pistol-packing bellhops to turn me loose."

"We caught him trying to get into the barn, sir," one of the officers told Peterson.

"Of course I was going into the barn," the indignant ranch hand screamed. "Where'd you think I would go to milk a cow?"

Peterson smiled. "It's all right, Fred. It's my fault. I should have told you Mr. Hatfield has free access."

The security men released Barney. He shook himself and glared at them.

"I'm terribly, sorry, Barney," Dr. Peterson said. "I forgot that you would be going down to milk the cows and I'm glad you reminded me. Do me a favor and milk Sally first, will you? I want to take that milk, or whatever it is,
with us when we leave in a few minutes."

* * * * *

The sun was crawling up the side of the mountains when Johnny and Dr. Peterson swung out of the ranch yard between two armored scout cars for the sixty-mile trip down the range road. Dew glistened in the early rays of light and the clear, cool morning air held little hint of the heat sure to come by midmorning. There was a rush of photographers towards the gate as the little convoy left the ranch. A battery of cameras grabbed shots of the vehicles heading south.

It was the beginning of a day that changed the entire foreign policy of the United States. It was also the day that started a host of the nation's finest nuclear physicists tottering towards psychiatrists' couches.

In rapid order in the next few days, Peterson's crew reinforced by hundreds of fellow scientists, technicians and military men, learned what Johnny Culpepper already knew.

They learned that (1) Sally's milk, diluted by as much as four hundred parts of pure water, made a better fuel than gasoline when ignited.

They also learned that (2) in reduced degrees of concentration, it became a substitute for any explosive of known chemical composition; (3) brought in contact with the compound inside one of the golden eggs, it produced an explosive starting at the kiloton level of one egg to two cups of milk and went up the scale but leveled off at a peak as the recipe was increased; (4) could be controlled by mixing jets to produce any desired stream of explosive power; and (5) they didn't have the wildest idea what was causing the reaction.

In that same order it brought (1) Standard Oil stock down to the value of wallpaper; (2) ditto for DuPont; (3) a new purge in the top level of the Supreme Soviet; (4) delight to rocketeers at Holloman Air Force Research Center, Cape Canaveral and Vandenburg Air Force Base; and (5) agonizing fits of hair-tearing to every chemist, biologist and physicist who had a part in the futile attempts to analyze the two ingredients of what the press had labeled "Thompson's Eggnog."

While white-coated veterinarians, agricultural experts and chemists prodded and poked Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III, others were giving a similar going-over to Hetty's chicken flock. Solomon's outraged screams of anger echoed across the desert as they subjected him to fowl indignities never before endured by a rooster.

Weeks passed and with each one new experiments disclosed new uses for the amazing Eggnog. While Sally placidly chewed her cuds and continued to give a steady five gallons of concentrated fury at each milking, Solomon's harem dutifully deposited from five to a dozen golden spheres of packaged power every day. At the same time, rocket research engineers completed their tests on the use of the Eggnog.

* * * * *

In the early hours of June 4th, a single-stage, two-egg, thirty-five gallon Atlas rocket poised on the launching pads at Cape Canaveral. From the loud-speaker atop the massive block-house came the countdown.

"X minus twenty seconds. X minus ten seconds. Nine ... eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... FIRE!"

The control officer stabbed the firing button and deep within the Atlas a relay clicked, activating a solenoid that pushed open a valve. A thin stream of Sally's milk shot in from one side of the firing chamber to blend with a fine spray of egg, batter coming from a jet in the opposite wall.

Spewing a solid tail of purple fire, the Atlas leaped like a wasp-stung heifer from the launching pads and thundered into space. The fuel orifices continued to expand to maximum pre-set opening. In ten seconds the nose cone turned from cherry-red to white heat and began sloughing its outer ceramic coating. At slightly more than forty-three thousand miles an hour, the great missile cleaved out of atmosphere into the void of space, leaving a shock wave that cracked houses and shattered glass for fifty miles from launching point.

A week later, America's newest rocket vessel, weighing more than thirty tons and christened The Egg Nog, was launched from the opposite coast at Vandenburg. Hastily modified to take the new fuel, the weight and space originally designed for the common garden variety of rocket fuel was filled with automatic camera and television equipment. In its stern stood a six-egg, one-hundred-gallon engine, while in the nose was a small, one-egg, fourteen-quart braking engine to slow it down for the return trip through the atmosphere.

Its destination—Mars!

A week later, The Egg Nog braked down through the troposphere, skidded to a piddling two-thousand miles, an hour through the stratosphere, automatically sprouted gliding wing stubs in the atmosphere and planed down to a spraying halt in the Pacific Ocean, fifty miles west of Ensenada in Baja, California. Aboard were man's first views of the red planet.

The world went mad with jubilation. From the capitals of the free nations congratulations poured into Washington. From Moscow came word of a one-hundred-ton spaceship to be launched in a few days, powered by a mixture of vodka and orange juice discovered by a bartender in Novorosk who was studying chemistry in night
school. This announcement was followed twenty-four hours later by a story in Pravda proving conclusively that Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III was a direct descendant of Nikita's Mujik Droshky V, a prize Guernsey bull produced in the barns of the Sopolov People's Collective twenty-six years ago.

Late in August, Air Force Major Clifton Wadsworth Quartermain climbed out of the port of the two-hundred-ton, two dozen-egg, two-hundred-thirty gallon space rocket Icarus, the first man into space and back. He had circled Venus and returned. No longer limited by fuel weight factors, scientists had been able to load enough shielding into the huge Icarus to protect a man from the deadly bombardment of the Van Allen radiation belts.

On September 15th, Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III, having been milked harder and faster than any Guernsey in history, went dry.

Less than half of the approximately twelve-hundred gallons of fuel she had produced during her hay days, remained on hand in the AEC storage vaults.

Three days later, Solomon, sprinting after one of his harem who was playing hard to get, bee-lined into the path of a security police jeep. There was an agonized squawk, a shower of feathers and mourning. A short time later, the number of golden eggs dropped daily until one morning, there were none. They never reappeared. The United States had stockpiled twenty-six dozen in an underground cave deep in the Rockies.

Man, who had burst like a butterfly into space, crawled back into his cocoon and pondered upon the stars from a worm's eye point of view.

Banging around in the back end of a common cattle truck, Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III came home to the Circle T in disgrace. In a corner of the truck, the late Solomon's harem cackled and voiced loud cries of misery as they huddled in the rude, slatted shipping coop. The truck turned off the county road and onto the dirt road leading to the main buildings. It rattled across the cattle guard and through the new unprotected and open gate in the barbed wire fence. Life had returned almost to normal at the Circle T.

But not for long.

Five days after Sally's ignominious dismissal from the armed forces, a staff car came racing up to the ranch. It skidded to a halt at the back-porch steps. Dr. Peterson jumped out and dashed up to the kitchen door.

"Well, for heaven's sake," Hetty cried. "Come on in, sonny. I ain't seen you for the longest spell."

Peterson entered and looked around.

"Where's Johnny, Mrs. Thompson?" he asked excitedly. "I've got some wonderful news."

"Now ain't that nice," Hetty exclaimed. "Your wife have a new baby or something? Johnny's down at the barn. I'll call him for you." She moved towards the door.

"Never mind," Peterson said, darting out the door, "I'll go down to the barn." He jumped from the porch and ran across the yard.

He found Johnny in the barn, rigging a new block and tackle for the hayloft. Barney was helping thread the new, manila line from a coil on the straw-littered floor.

"Johnny, we've found it," Peterson shouted jubilantly as he burst into the barn.

"Why, Doc, good to see you again," Johnny said. "Found what?"

"The secret of Sally's milk," Peterson cried. He looked wildly around the barn. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Sally, of course," the scientist yelped.

"Oh, she's down in the lower pasture with Queenie," Johnny replied.

"She's all right, isn't she?" Peterson asked anxiously.

"Oh, sure, she's fine, Doc. Why?"

"Listen," Peterson said hurriedly, "our people think they've stumbled on something. Now we still don't know what's in those eggs or in Sally's milk that make them react as they do. All we've been able to find is some strange isotope but we don't know how to reproduce it or synthesize it.

"But we do think we know what made Sally give that milk and made those hens start laying the gold eggs."

Johnny and Barney laid down their work and motioned the excited scientist to join them on a bench against the horse stalls.

"Do you remember the day Sally came fresh?" Peterson continued.

"Not exactly," Johnny replied, "but I could look it up in my journal. I keep a good record of things like new registered stock births."

"Never mind," Peterson said. "I've already checked. It was May 9th."

He paused and smiled triumphantly.

"I guess that's right if you say so," Johnny said. "But what about it?"

"And that was the same day that the hens laid the first golden egg too, wasn't it?" Peterson asked.
"Why it sure was, Doc," Barney chimed in. "I remember, cause Miz Thompson was so mad that the milk was bad and the eggs went wrong both in the same day."

"That's what we know. Now listen to this, Johnny," the scientist continued. "During the night of May 8th, we fired an entirely new kind of test shot on the range. I can't tell you what it was, only to say that it was a special atomic device that even we didn't know too much about. That's why we fired it from a cave in the side of a hill down there.

"Since then, our people have been working on the pretty good assumption that something happened to that cow and those chickens not too long before they started giving the Eggnog ingredients. Someone remembered the experimental test shot, checked the date and then went out and had a look at the cave. We already had some earlier suspicions that this device produced a new type of beam ray. We took sightings from the cave, found them to be in a direct, unbroken line with the Circle T. We set up the device again and using a very small model, tried it out on some chick embryos. Sure enough, we got a mutation. But not the right kind.

"So we're going to recreate the entire situation right here, only this time, we're going to expose not only Sally but a dozen other Guernseys from as close to her blood line as we can get.

"And we already knew that you had a young rooster sired by Solomon."

"But, Doc," Johnny protested. "Sally had a calf early that morning. Isn't that going to make a difference?"

"Of course it is," Peterson exclaimed. "And she's going to have another one the same way. And so are all the other cows. You're the one that told me she had her calf by artificial insemination, didn't you?"

Johnny nodded.

"Well, then she's going to have another calf from the same bull and so will the other cows."

"Pore Sally," Barney said sorrowfully. "They're sure takin' the romance outta motherhood for you."

The next day the guards were back on the gate. By midafternoon twelve fine young Guernseys arrived, together with a corps of veterinarians, biologists and security police. By nightfall, Sally and her companions were all once again in a "delicate condition."

A mile from the ranch house, a dormitory was built for the veterinarians and biologists and a barracks thrown up for the security guards. A thirty-five thousand dollar, twelve-foot high chain link fence, topped by barbed wire, was constructed around the pasture and armored cars patrolled the fence by day and kept guard over the pregnant bovines by night in the barn.

Through the fall, into the long winter and back to budding spring again, the host of experts and guards watched and cared for the new calf-bloated herd.

The fact that Sally had gone dry had been kept a carefully guarded national secret. To keep up the pretense and show to the world that America still controlled the only proven method of manned space travel, the Joint Chiefs of Staff voted to expend two hundred gallons of the precious, small store of milk on hand for another interplanetary junket, this time to inspect the rings around Saturn.

Piloting a smaller and more sophisticated but equally-well protected version of Icarus, Major Quartermain abandoned the fleshpots of earth and the adulation of his coast-to-coast collection of worshiping females to again hurtle into the unknown.

"It was strictly a milk run," Major Quartermain was quoted as saying as he emerged from his ship after an uneventful but propaganda-loaded trip.

By the middle of May, it was the consensus of the veterinarians that Delivery Day would be July 4th. Plans were drafted for the repeat atomic cave shot at 9:00 p.m., July 3rd. The pregnant herd was to be given labor-inducing shots at midnight, and, if all went well, deliveries would start within a few hours. Just to be sure that nothing would shield the cows from the rays of the explosion, they were put in a corral on the south side of the barn until 9:30 p.m., on the night of the firing.

Solomon's successor and a new bevy of hens were already roosting in the same old chicken house and egg production was normal.

On the night of July 3rd, at precisely 9:00 p.m., a sheet of light erupted from the Nevada hillside cave and the ground shook and rumbled for a few miles. It wasn't a powerful blast, nor had been the original shot. Sixty miles away, thirteen Guernsey cows munched at a rick of fresh hay and chewed contentedly in the moonlight.

At 3:11 a.m., the following morning the first calf arrived, followed in rapid order by a dozen more.

Sally's Cloverdale Marathon III dropped her calf at 4:08 a.m. on Independence Day.

At 7:00 a.m., she was milked and produced two and a half gallons of absolutely clear, odorless, tasteless and non-ignitable fluid. Eleven other Guernseys gave forth gushing, foaming, creamy rich gallon after gallon of Grade A milk.

The thirteenth cow filled two buckets with something that looked like weak cocoa and smelled like stale tea.
But when a white-smocked University of California poultry specialist entered the chicken house later in the morning, he found nothing but normal, white fresh eggs in the nests. He finally arrived at the conclusion that Solomon's old harem had known for some time; whatever it was that Solomon had been gifted with, this new rooster just didn't have it.

A rush call went out for a dozen of the precious store of golden eggs to be sent to the testing labs down range.

Two hours later, Dr. Peterson, surrounded by fellow scientists, stood before a bank of closed circuit television monitors in the Frenchman's Flat headquarters building. The scene on the screens was the interior of a massive steel-and-concrete test building several miles up range. Resting on the floor of the building was an open, gallon-sized glass beaker filled with the new version of Sally's milk.

Poised directly above the opened beaker was a funnel-shaped vessel containing the contents of one golden egg.

Dr. Peterson reached for a small lever. By remote control, the lever would gradually open the bottom of the funnel. He squeezed gently, slowly applying pressure. An involuntary gasp arose from the spectators as a tiny trickle of egg fluid fell from the funnel towards the open beaker.

Instinctively, everyone in the room clamped their eyes shut in anticipation of a blast. A second later, Peterson peered cautiously at the screen. The beaker of milk had turned a cloudy pale blue. It neither fizzed nor exploded. It just sat.

He levered another drop from the funnel. The stringy, glutenous mass plopped into the beaker and the liquid swirled briefly and turned more opaque, taking on more of a bluish tinge.

A babble of voices broke through the room when it was apparent that no explosion was forthcoming.

Peterson slumped into a nearby chair and stared at the screen.

"Now what?" he moaned.

* * * * *

The "what" developed twelve hectic hours later after time lost initially in shaking, bouncing and beaming the new substance on the outside chance it might develop a latent tendency towards demolition.

Satisfied that whatever it was in the beaker wasn't explosive, the liquid was quickly poured off into sixteen small half-pint beakers and speeded to as many different laboratories for possible analysis.

"What about the other stuff?" Peterson was asked, referring to the brownish "milk" subsequently identified as coming from a dainty young cow known as Melody Buttercup Greenbrier IV.

"One thing at a time," replied Peterson. "Let's find out what we have here before we got involved in the second problem."

At 9:00 p.m., that night, Peterson was called to the radiation labs. He was met at the door by a glazed-eyed physicist who led him back to his office.

He motioned Peterson to a seat and then handed him a sheaf of photographic papers and other charts. Each of the photo sheets had a clear, white outline of a test beaker surrounded by a solid field of black. Two of the papers were all white.

"I don't believe it, Floyd," the physicist said, running his hands through his hair. "I've seen it, I've done it, I've tested it, proven it, and I still don't believe it."

Peterson riffled the sheaf of papers and waited expectantly.

"You don't believe what, Fred?" he asked.

The physicist leaned over and tapped the papers in Peterson's hands. "We've subjected that crazy stuff to every source and kind of high and low energy radiation we can produce here and that means just about everything short of triggering an H-device on it. We fired alphas, gammas, betas, the works, in wide dispersion, concentrated beam and just plain exposure.

"Not so much as one neutron of any of them went beyond the glass surrounding that forsaken slop.

"They curved around it, Floyd. They curved around it."

The physicist leaned his head on the desk. "Nothing should react like that," he sobbed. He struggled for composure as Peterson stared dazedly at the test sheets.

"That's not the whole story," the physicist continued. He walked to Peterson's side and extracted the two all-white sheets.

"This," he said brokenly, "represents a sheet of photographic paper dipped in that crud and then allowed to dry before being bombarded with radiation. And this," he waved the other sheet, "is a piece of photo paper in the center of a panel protected by another sheet of ordinary typing paper coated with that stuff."


The other man nodded dumbly.

"Eight years of university," the physicist whispered to himself. "Six years in summer schools. Four fellowships. Ten years in research."
"All shot to hell," he screamed, "by a stinking, hayburning cow."

Peterson patted him gently on the shoulder. "It's all right, Fred. Don't take it so hard. It could be worse."

"How?" he asked hollowly. "Have this stuff milked from a kangaroo?"

* * * * *

Back in his office, Peterson waved off a dozen calls while he gave orders for fresh quantities of the blue milk to be rushed to the Argonne laboratories for further radiation tests and confirmation of the Nevada results. He ordered a test set up for the brown fluid for the following morning and then took a call from the AEC commissioner.

"Yes, John," he said, "we've got something."

Operation Milkmaid was in full swing!

The following morning observers again clustered about the monitoring room as Peterson prepared to duplicate the tests, using a sample of the Melody's brownish milk.

There was the same involuntary remote cringing as the first drop of egg fell towards the beaker, but this time, Peterson forced himself to watch. Again the gentle plop was heard through the amplifiers and nothing more. A similar clouding spread through the already murky fluid and when the entire contents of one egg had been added, the beaker took on a solid, brown and totally opaque appearance. The scientists watched the glass container for several minutes, anticipating another possible delayed blast.

When nothing occurred, Peterson nodded to an assistant at an adjoining console. The aide worked a series of levers and a remotely-controlled mechanical arm came into view on the screen. The claw of the arm descended over the beaker and clasping it gently, bounced it lightly on the cement bunker floor. The only sound was the muffled thunk of the glass container against the concrete.

The assistant wiggled his controls gently and the beaker jiggled back and forth, a few inches off the floor. Peterson, who had been watching closely, called out. "Do that again."

The operator jostled the controls. "Look at that," Peterson exclaimed. "That stuff's hardened."

A quick movement confirmed this and then Peterson ordered the beaker raised five feet from the floor and slowly tipped. Over the container went as the claw rotated in its socket. The glass had turned almost 180° towards the floor when the entire mass of solidified glob slid out.

The watchers caught their breath as it fell to the hard floor. The glob hit the floor, bounced up a couple of inches, fell back, bounced again and then quivered to a stop. What was soon to be known as Melody's Mighty Material had been born.

The testing started. But there was a difference. By the time the brown chunk had been removed from the bunker it had solidified to the point that nothing would break or cut it. The surface yielded slightly to the heaviest cutting edge of a power saw and then sprang back, unmarked. A diamond drill spun ineffectually.

So the entire block started making the rounds of the various labs. It was with downright jubilation that radiation labs reported no properties of resistance for the stuff. One after the other, the test proved nothing until the physical properties unit came up with an idea.

"You can't cut it, break it or tear it," the technician told Peterson, as he hefted the chunk of lightweight enigma. "You can't burn it, shoot holes in it, or so much as mark the surface with any known acid. This stuff's tougher than steel and about fifty times lighter."

"O.K.,” Peterson asked, "so what good is it?"

"You can mold it when you mix it," the technician said significantly.

"Hey, you're right," Peterson jumped up excitedly. "Why, a spacer cast out of this stuff and coated with Sally's paint would be light enough and shielded enough to work on regular missile fuels."

* * * * *

Working under crash priorities, the nation's three leading plastics plants turned out three, lightweight, molded, one-man space vehicles from the government-supplied Melody's Mix. A double coating of Sally's Paint then covered the hulls and a single stage liquid fuel rocket engine was hooked to the less-than-one-ton engineless hull.

Twenty-eight days after the milk first appeared, on a warm August evening, the first vehicle stood on the pads at Cape Canaveral, illuminated by towers of lights. Fuel crews had finished loading the tanks which would be jettisoned along with the engine at burn-out. Inside the rocket, Major Quartermain lounged uncomfortably and cramped in the take-off sling for a short but telling trip through the Van Allen radiation fields and back to Earth.

The take-off sling rested inside an escape capsule since the use of chemical fuel brought back many of the old uncertainties of launchings. On the return trip, Quartermain would eject at sixty thousand feet and pull the capsule's huge parachute for a slow drop to the surface of the Atlantic where a recovery fleet was standing by. The light rocket hull would pop a separate chute and also drift down for recovery and analysis.

Inside the ship, Quartermain sniffed the air and curled his nose. "Let's get this thing on the road," he spoke into his throat mike. "Some of that Florida air must have seeped in here."
"Four minutes to final countdown," blockhouse control replied. "Turn on your blowers for a second."

Outside the ship, the fuel crews cleared their equipment away from the pad. The same ripe, heavy odor hung in the warm night air.

At 8:02 p.m., twenty-eight days after the new milks made their first appearance, Major Quartermain blasted off in a perfect launching.

At 8:03 p.m., the two other Melody Mix hulls standing on nearby pads, began to melt.

At 8:04 p.m., the still-roaring engine fell from the back end of Quartermain's rocket in a flaming arc back towards Earth. Fifteen seconds later, he hurtled his escape capsule out of the collapsing rocket hull. The parachute opened and the daring astronaut drifted towards the sea.

Simultaneously, in a dozen labs around the nation, blocks and molds of Melody's Mix made from that first batch of milk, collapsed into piles of putrid goo. Every day thereafter, newer blocks of the mix reached the twenty-eight-day limit and similarly broke down into malodorous blobs.

* * * * *

It was a month before the stinking, gooey mess that flowed over the launching pads at the Cape was cleaned up by crews wearing respirators and filter masks. It took considerably longer to get the nation's three top plastics firms back in operation as the fetid flow of unfinished rocket parts wrecked machinery and drove personnel from the area.

The glob that had been Quartermain's vehicle fell slowly back to Earth, disintegrating every minute until it reached the consistency of thin gruel. At this point, it was caught by a jet air stream and carried in a miasmic cloud halfway around the world until it finally floated down to coat the Russian city of Urmsk in a veil of vile odor. The United States disclaimed any knowledge of the cloud.

* * * * *

"LAS VEGAS, NEV., May 8 (AP)--The Atomic Energy Commission today announced it has squeezed the last drop from Operation Milkmaid."

"After a year of futile experimentation has failed to get anything more than good, Grade A milk from the world's two most famous cows, the AEC says it has closed down its field laboratory at the Circle T ranch."

"Dr. Floyd Peterson, who has been in charge of the attempt to again reproduce Sally's Milk, told newsmen that the famed Guernsey and her stablemate, Melody, no longer gave exotic and unidentifiable liquids that sent man zooming briefly to the stars."

"For a while, it looked like we had it in the bag," Peterson said. "You might say now, though, that the tests have been an udder failure."

"Meanwhile, in Washington, AEC commissioner...."

THE END
Before you wish for something—or send agents to get it for you—make very, very sure you really want it. You might get it, you know....

Preface ... For some forty years critics of the U.S.S.R. have been desiring, predicting, not to mention praying for, its collapse. For twenty of these years the author of this story has vaguely wondered what would replace the collapsed Soviet system. A return to Czarism? Oh, come now! Capitalism as we know it today in the advanced Western countries? It would seem difficult after almost half a century of State ownership and control of the means of production, distribution, communications, education, science. Then what? The question became increasingly interesting following recent visits not only to Moscow and Leningrad but also to various other capital cities of the Soviet complex. A controversial subject? Indeed it is. You can't get much more controversial than this in the world today. But this is science fiction, and here we go.

* * * * *

Paul Koslov nodded briefly once or twice as he made his way through the forest of desks. Behind him he caught snatches of tittering voices in whisper.
"... That's him ... The Chief's hatchetman ... Know what they call him in Central America, a pistola, that means ...

About Iraq ... And that time in Egypt ... Did you notice his eyes ... How would you like to date him ... That's him.

I was at a cocktail party once when he was there. Shivery ... cold-blooded--"

Paul Koslov grinned inwardly. He hadn't asked for the reputation but it isn't everyone who is a legend before thirty-five. What was it Newsweek had called him? "The T. E. Lawrence of the Cold War." The trouble was it wasn't something you could turn off. It had its shortcomings when you found time for some personal life.

He reached the Chief's office, rapped with a knuckle and pushed his way through.

The Chief and a male secretary, who was taking dictation, looked up. The secretary frowned, evidently taken aback by the cavalier entrance, but the Chief said, "Hello, Paul, come on in. Didn't expect you quite so soon." And to the secretary, "Dickens, that's all."

When Dickens was gone the Chief scowled at his trouble-shooter. "Paul, you're bad for discipline around here. Can't you even knock before you enter? How is Nicaragua?"

Paul Koslov slumped into a leather easy-chair and scowled. "I did knock. Most of it's in my report. Nicaragua is ...

tranquil. It'll stay tranquil for a while, too. There isn't so much as a parlor pink--"

"And Lopez--?"

Paul said slowly, "Last time I saw Raul was in a swamp near Lake Managua. The very last time."
The Chief said hurriedly, "Don't give me the details. I leave details up to you."
"I know," Paul said flatly.

His superior drew a pound can of Sir Walter Raleigh across the desk, selected a briar from a pipe rack and while he was packing in tobacco said, "Paul, do you know what day it is--and what year?"
"It's Tuesday. And 1965."
The bureau chief looked at his disk calendar. "Um-m-m. Today the Seven Year Plan is completed."
Paul snorted.
The Chief said mildly, "Successfully. For all practical purposes, the U.S.S.R. has surpassed us in gross national product."
"That's not the way I understand it."
"Then you make the mistake of believing our propaganda. That's always a mistake, believing your own propaganda. Worse than believing the other man's."

"Our steel capacity is a third again as much as theirs."
"Yes, and currently, what with our readjustment—remember when they used to call them recessions, or even earlier, depressions—our steel industry is operating at less than sixty per cent of capacity. The Soviets always operate at one hundred per cent of capacity. They don't have to worry about whether or not they can sell it. If they produce more steel than they immediately need, they use it to build another steel mill."
The Chief shook his head. "As long ago as 1958 they began passing us, product by product. Grain, butter, and timber production, jet aircraft, space flight, and coal--"

Paul leaned forward impatiently. "We put out more than three times as many cars, refrigerators, kitchen stoves,
washing machines."

His superior said, "That's the point. While we were putting the product of our steel mills into automobiles and automatic kitchen equipment, they did without these things and put their steel into more steel mills, more railroads, more factories. We leaned back and took it easy, sneered at their progress, talked a lot about our freedom and liberty to our allies and the neutrals and enjoyed our refrigerators and washing machines until they finally passed us."

"You sound like a Tass broadcast from Moscow."

"Um-m-m, I've been trying to," the chief said. "However, that's still roughly the situation. The fact that you and I personally, and a couple of hundred million Americans, prefer our cars and such to more steel mills, and prefer our personal freedoms and liberties is beside the point. We should have done less laughing seven years ago and more thinking about today. As things stand, give them a few more years at this pace and every neutral nation in the world is going to fall into their laps."

"That's putting it strong, isn't it?"

"Strong?" the chief growled disgustedly. "That's putting it mildly. Even some of our allies are beginning to waver. Eight years ago, India and China both set out to industrialize themselves. Today, China is the third industrial power of the world. Where's India, about twentieth? Ten years from now China will probably be first. I don't even allow myself to think where she'll be twenty-five years from now."

"The Indians were a bunch of idealistic screwballs."

"That's one of the favorite alibis, isn't it? Actually we, the West, let them down. They couldn't get underway. The Soviets backed China with everything they could toss in."

Paul crossed his legs and leaned back. "It seems to me I've run into this discussion a few hundred times at cocktail parties."

The chief pulled out a drawer and brought forth a king-size box of kitchen matches. He struck one with a thumbnail and peered through tobacco smoke at Paul Koslov as he lit up.

"The point is that the system the Russkies used when they started their first five-year plan back in 1928, and the system used in China, works. If we, with our traditions of freedom and liberty, like it or not, it works. Every citizen of the country is thrown into the grinding mill to increase production. Everybody, the chief grinned sourly, "that is, except the party elite, who are running the whole thing. Everybody sacrifices for the sake of the progress of the whole country."

"I know," Paul said. "Give me enough time and I'll find out what this lecture is all about."

The chief grunted at him. "The Commies are still in power. If they remain in power and continue to develop the way they're going, we'll be through, completely through, in another few years. We'll be so far behind we'll be the world's laughing-stock--and everybody else will be on the Soviet bandwagon."

He seemed to switch subjects. "Ever hear of Somerset Maugham?"

"Sure. I've read several of his novels."

"I was thinking of Maugham the British Agent, rather than Maugham the novelist, but it's the same man."

"British agent?"

"Um-m-m. He was sent to Petrograd in 1917 to prevent the Bolshevik revolution. The Germans had sent Lenin and Zinoviev up from Switzerland, where they'd been in exile, by a sealed train in hopes of starting a revolution in Czarist Russia. The point I'm leading to is that in one of his books, 'The Summing Up,' I believe, Maugham mentions in passing that had he got to Petrograd possibly six weeks earlier he thinks he could have done his job successfully."

Paul looked at him blankly. "What could he have done?"

The chief shrugged. "It was all out war. The British wanted to keep Russia in the allied ranks so as to divert as many German troops as possible from the Western front. The Germans wanted to eliminate the Russians. Maugham had carte blanche. Anything would have gone. Elements of the British fleet to fight the Bolsheviks, unlimited amounts of money for anything he saw fit from bribery to hiring assassins. What would have happened, for instance, if he could have had Lenin and Trotsky killed?"

Paul said suddenly, "What has all this got to do with me?"

"We're giving you the job this time."

"Maugham's job?" Paul didn't get it.

"No, the other one. I don't know who the German was who engineered sending Lenin up to Petrograd, but that's the equivalent of your job." He seemed to go off on another bent. "Did you read Djilas' 'The New Class' about a decade ago?"

"Most of it, as I recall. One of Tito's top men who turned against the Commies and did quite a job of exposing the so-called classless society."

"That's right. I've always been surprised that so few people bothered to wonder how Djilas was able to smuggle
his book out of one of Tito's strongest prisons and get it to publishers in the West.

"Never thought of it," Paul agreed. "How could he?"

"Because," the Chief said, knocking the ash from his pipe and replacing it in the rack, "there was and is a very strong underground in all the Communist countries. Not only Yugoslavia, but the Soviet Union as well."

Paul stirred impatiently. "Once again, what's all this got to do with me?"

"They're the ones you're going to work with. The anti-Soviet underground. You've got unlimited leeway. Unlimited support to the extent we can get it to you. Unlimited funds for whatever you find you need them for. Your job is to help the underground start a new Russian Revolution."

* * * * *

Paul Koslov, his face still bandaged following plastic surgery, spent a couple of hours in the Rube Goldberg department inspecting the latest gadgets of his trade.

Derek Stevens said, "The Chief sent down a memo to introduce you to this new item. We call it a Tracy."

Paul frowned at the wristwatch, fingered it a moment, held it to his ear. It ticked and the second hand moved.

"Tracy?" he said.

Stevens said, "After Dick Tracy. Remember, a few years ago? His wrist two-way radio."

"But this is really a watch," Paul said.

"Sure. Keeps fairly good time, too. However, that's camouflage. It's also a two-way radio. Tight beam from wherever you are to the Chief."

Paul pursed his lips. "The transistor boys are really doing it up brown." He handed the watch back to Derek Stevens. "Show me how it works, Derek."

They spent fifteen minutes on the communications device, then Derek Stevens said, "Here's another item the Chief thought you might want to see:"

It was a compact, short-muzzled hand gun. Paul handled it with the ease of long practice. "The grip's clumsy. What's its advantage? I don't particularly like an automatic."

Derek Stevens motioned with his head. "Come into the firing range, Koslov, and we'll give you a demonstration."

Paul shot him a glance from the side of his eyes, then nodded. "Lead on."

In the range, Stevens had a man-size silhouette put up. He stood to one side and said, "O.K., let her go."

Paul stood easily, left hand in pants pocket, brought the gun up and tightened on the trigger. He frowned and pressed again.

He scowled at Derek Stevens. "It's not loaded."

Stevens grunted amusement. "Look at the target. First time you got it right over the heart."

"I'll be ...," Paul began. He looked down at the weapon in surprise. "Noiseless and recoilless. What caliber is it, Derek, and what's the muzzle velocity?"

"We call it the .38 Noiseless," Stevens said. "It has the punch of that .44 Magnum you're presently carrying."

With a fluid motion Paul Koslov produced the .44 Magnum from the holster under his left shoulder and tossed it to one side. "That's the last time I tote that cannon," he said. He balanced the new gun in his hand in admiration. "Have the front sight taken off for me, Derek, and the fore part of the trigger guard. I need a quick draw gun." He added absenty, "How did you know I carried a .44?"

Stevens said, "You're rather famous, Koslov. The Colonel Lawrence of the Cold War. The journalists are kept from getting very much about you, but what they do learn they spread around."

Paul Koslov said flatly, "Why don't you like me, Stevens? In this game I don't appreciate people on our team who don't like me. It's dangerous."

Derek Stevens flushed. "I didn't say I didn't like you."

"You didn't have to."

"It's nothing personal," Stevens said.

Paul Koslov looked at him.

Stevens said, "I don't approve of Americans committing political assassinations."

Paul Koslov grinned wolfishly and without humor. "You'll have a hard time proving that even our cloak and dagger department has ever authorized assassination, Stevens. By the way, I'm not an American."

Derek Stevens was not the type of man whose jaw dropped, but he blinked. "Then what are you?"

"A Russian," Paul snapped. "And look, Stevens, we're busy now, but when you've got some time to do a little thinking, consider the ethics of warfare."

Stevens was flushed again at the tone. "Ethics of warfare?"

"There aren't any," Paul Koslov snapped. "There hasn't been chivalry in war for a long time, and there probably never will be again. Neither side can afford it. And I'm talking about cold war as well as hot." He scowled at the
other. "Or did you labor under the illusion that only the Commies had tough operators on their side?"

* * * * *

Paul Koslov crossed the Atlantic in a supersonic TU-180 operated by Europa Airways. That in itself galled him. It was bad enough that the Commies had stolen a march on the West with the first jet liner to go into mass production, the TU-104 back in 1957. By the time the United States brought out its first really practical trans-Atlantic jets in 1959 the Russians had come up with the TU-114 which its designer, old Andrei Tupolev named the largest, most efficient and economical aircraft flying.

In civil aircraft they had got ahead and stayed ahead. Subsidized beyond anything the West could or at least would manage, the air lines of the world couldn't afford to operate the slower, smaller and more expensive Western models. One by one, first the neutrals such as India, and then even members of the Western bloc began equipping their air lines with Russian craft.

Paul grunted his disgust at the memory of the strong measures that had to be taken by the government to prevent even some of the American lines from buying Soviet craft at the unbelievably low prices they offered them.

* * * * *

In London he presented a card on which he had added a numbered code in pencil. Handed it over a desk to the British intelligence major.

"I believe I'm expected," Paul said.

The major looked at him, then down at the card. "Just a moment, Mr. Smith. I'll see if his lordship is available. Won't you take a chair?" He left the room.

Paul Koslov strolled over to the window and looked out on the moving lines of pedestrians below. He had first been in London some thirty years ago. So far as he could remember, there were no noticeable changes with the exception of automobile design. He wondered vaguely how long it took to make a noticeable change in the London street scene.

The major re-entered the room with a new expression of respect on his face. "His lordship will see you immediately, Mr. Smith."

"Thanks," Paul said. He entered the inner office.

Lord Carrol was attired in civilian clothes which somehow failed to disguise a military quality in his appearance. He indicated a chair next to his desk. "We've been instructed to give you every assistance Mr. ... Smith. Frankly, I can't imagine of just what this could consist."

Paul said, as he adjusted himself in the chair, "I'm going into the Soviet Union on an important assignment. I'll need as large a team at my disposal as we can manage. You have agents in Russia, of course?" He lifted his eyebrows.

His lordship cleared his throat and his voice went even stiffer. "All major military nations have a certain number of espionage operatives in each other's countries. No matter how peaceful the times, this is standard procedure."

"And these are hardly peaceful times," Paul said dryly. "I'll want a complete list of your Soviet based agents and the necessary information on how to contact them."

Lord Carrol stared at him. Finally sputtered, "Man, why? You're not even a British national. This is--"

Paul, held up a hand. "We're co-operating with the Russian underground. Co-operating isn't quite strong enough a word. We're going to push them into activity if we can."

The British intelligence head looked down at the card before him. "Mr. Smith," he read. He looked up. "John Smith, I assume."

Paul said, still dryly, "Is there any other?"

Lord Carrol said, "See here, you're really Paul Koslov, aren't you?"

Paul looked at him, said nothing.

Lord Carrol said impatiently, "What you ask is impossible. Our operatives all have their own assignments, their own work. Why do you need them?"

"This is the biggest job ever, overthrowing the Soviet State. We need as many men as we can get on our team. Possibly I won't have to use them but, if I do, I want them available."

The Britisher rapped, "You keep mentioning our team but according to the dossier we carry on you, Mr. Koslov, you are neither British nor even a Yankee. And you ask me to turn over our complete Soviet machinery."

Paul came to his feet and leaned over the desk, there was a paleness immediately beneath his ears and along his jaw line. "Listen," he said tightly, "if I'm not on this team, there just is no team. Just a pretense of one. When there's a real team there has to be a certain spirit. A team spirit. I don't care if you're playing cricket, football or international cold war. If there's one thing that's important to me, that I've based my whole life upon, it's this, understand? I've got team spirit. Perhaps no one else in the whole West has it, but I do."
Inwardly, Lord Carrol was boiling. He snapped, "You're neither British nor American. In other words, you are a mercenary. How do we know that the Russians won't offer you double or triple what the Yankees pay for your services?"

Paul sat down again and looked at his watch. "My time is limited," he said. "I have to leave for Paris this afternoon and be in Bonn tomorrow. I don't care what opinions you might have in regard to my mercenary motives, Lord Carrol. I've just come from Downing Street. I suggest you make a phone call there. At the request of Washington, your government has given me carte blanche in this matter."

* * * * *

Paul flew into Moscow in an Aeroflot jet, landing at Vnukovo airport on the outskirts of the city. He entered as an American businessman, a camera importer who was also interested in doing a bit of tourist sightseeing. He was traveling deluxe category which entitled him to a Zil complete with chauffeur and an interpreter-guide when he had need of one. He was quartered in the Ukrayna, on Dorogomilovskaya Quai, a twenty-eight floor skyscraper with a thousand rooms.

It was Paul's first visit to Moscow but he wasn't particularly thrown off. He kept up with developments and was aware of the fact that as early as the late 1950s, the Russians had begun to lick the problems of ample food, clothing and finally shelter. Even those products once considered sheer luxuries were now in abundant supply. If material things alone had been all that counted, the Soviet man in the street wasn't doing so badly.

He spent the first several days getting the feel of the city and also making his preliminary business calls. He was interested in a new "automated" camera currently being touted by the Russians as the world's best. Fastest lens, foolproof operation, guaranteed for the life of the owner, and retailing for exactly twenty-five dollars.

He was told, as expected, that the factory and distribution point was in Leningrad and given instructions and letters of introduction.

On the fifth day he took the Red Arrow Express to Leningrad and established himself at the Astoria Hotel, 39 Hertzen Street. It was one of the many of the Intourist hotels going back to before the revolution.

He spent the next day allowing his guide to show him the standard tourist sights. The Winter Palace, where the Bolshevik revolution was won when the mutinied cruiser Aurora steamed up the river and shelled it. The Hermitage Museum, rivaled only by the Vatican and Louvre. The Alexandrovskaya Column, the world's tallest monolithic stone monument. The modest personal palace of Peter the Great. The Peter and Paul Cathedral. The king-size Kirov Stadium. The Leningrad subway, as much a museum as a system of transportation.

He saw it all, tourist fashion, and wondered inwardly what the Intourist guide would have thought had he known that this was Mr. John Smith's home town.

The day following, he turned his business problem over to the guide. He wanted to meet, let's see now, oh yes, here it is, Leonid Shvernik, of the Mikoyan Camera works. Could it be arranged?

Of course it could be arranged. The guide went into five minutes of oratory on the desire of the Soviet Union to trade with the West, and thus spread everlasting peace.

An interview was arranged for Mr. Smith with Mr. Shvernik for that afternoon.

Mr. Smith met Mr. Shvernik in the latter's office at two and they went through the usual amenities. Mr. Shvernik spoke excellent English so Mr. Smith was able to dismiss his interpreter-guide for the afternoon. When he was gone and they were alone Mr. Shvernik went into his sales talk.

"I can assure you, sir, that not since the Japanese startled the world with their new cameras shortly after the Second War, has any such revolution in design and quality taken place. The Mikoyan is not only the best camera produced anywhere, but since our plant is fully automated, we can sell it for a fraction the cost of German, Japanese or American--"

Paul Koslov came to his feet, walked quietly over to one of the pictures hanging on the wall, lifted it, pointed underneath and raised his eyebrows at the other.

Leonid Shvernik leaned back in his chair, shocked.

Paul remained there until at last the other shook his head.

Paul said, in English, "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes." Shvernik said. "There are no microphones in here. I absolutely know. Who are you?"

Paul said, "In the movement they call you Georgi, and you're top man in the Leningrad area."

Shvernik's hand came up from under the desk and he pointed a heavy military revolver at his visitor. "Who are you?" he repeated.

Paul ignored the gun. "Someone who knows that you are Georgi," he said "I'm from America. Is there any chance of anybody intruding?"

"Yes, one of my colleagues. Or perhaps a secretary."

"Then I suggest we go to a bar, or some place, for a drink or a cup of coffee or whatever the current Russian
equivalent might be.

Shvernik looked at him searchingly. "Yes," he said finally. "There's a place down the street." He began to stick the gun in his waistband, changed his mind and put it back into the desk drawer.

As soon as they were on the open street and out of earshot of other pedestrians, Paul said, "Would you rather I spoke Russian? I have the feeling that we'd draw less attention than if we speak English."

Shvernik said tightly, "Do the Intourist people know you speak Russian? If not, stick to English. Now, how do you know my name? I have no contacts with the Americans."

"I got it through my West German contacts."

The Russian's face registered unsuppressed fury. "Do they ignore the simplest of precautions! Do they reveal me to every source that asks?"

Paul said mildly, "Herr Ludwig is currently under my direction. Your secret is as safe as it has ever been."

The underground leader remained silent for a long moment. "You're an American, eh, and Ludwig told you about me? What do you want now?"

"To help," Paul Koslov said.

"How do you mean, to help? How can you help? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Help in any way you want. Money, printing presses, mimeograph machines, radio transmitters, weapons, manpower in limited amounts, know-how, training, anything you need to help overthrow the Soviet government."

They had reached the restaurant. Leonid Shvernik became the Russian export official. He ushered his customer to a secluded table. Saw him comfortably into his chair.

"Do you actually know anything about cameras?" he asked.

"Yes," Paul said, "we're thorough. I can buy cameras from you and they'll be marketed in the States."

"Good." The waiter was approaching. Shvernik said, "Have you ever eaten caviar Russian style?"

"I don't believe so," Paul said "I'm not very hungry."

"Nothing to do with hunger." Shvernik said. From the waiter he ordered raisin bread, sweet butter, caviar and a carafe of vodka.

The waiter went off for it and Shvernik said, "To what extent are you willing to help us? Money, for instance. What kind of money, rubles, dollars? And how much? A revolutionary movement can always use money."

"Any kind," Paul said flatly, "and any amount."

Shvernik was impressed. He said eagerly, "Any amount within reason, eh?"

Paul looked into his face and said flatly, "Any amount, period. It doesn't have to be particularly reasonable. Our only qualification would be a guarantee it is going into the attempt to overthrow the Soviets--not into private pockets."

The waiter was approaching. Shvernik drew some brochures from his pocket, spread them before Paul Koslov and began to point out with a fountain pen various features of the Mikoyan camera.

The waiter put the order on the table and stood by for a moment for further orders.

Shvernik said, "First you take a sizable portion of vodka, like this." He poured them two jolts. "And drink it down, ah, bottoms up, you Americans say. Then you spread butter on a small slice of raisin bread, and cover it with a liberal portion of caviar. Good? Then you eat your little sandwich and drink another glass of vodka. Then you start all over again."

"I can see it could be fairly easy to get stoned, eating caviar Russian style," Paul laughed.

They went through the procedure and the waiter wandered off.

Paul said, "I can take several days arranging the camera deal with you. Then I can take a tour of the country, supposedly giving it a tourist look-see, but actually making contact with more of your organization. I can then return in the future, supposedly to make further orders. I can assure you, these cameras are going to sell very well in the States. I'll be coming back, time and again--for business reasons. Meanwhile, do you have any members among the interpreter-guides in the local Intourist offices?"

Shvernik nodded. "Yes. And, yes, that would be a good idea. We'll assign Ana Furtseva to you, if we can arrange it. And possibly she can even have a chauffeur assigned you who'll also be one of our people."

That was the first time Paul Koslov heard the name Ana Furtseva.

* * * * *

In the morning Leonid Shvernik came to the hotel in a Mikoyan Camera Works car loaded with cameras and the various accessories that were available for the basic model. He began gushing the advantages of the Mikoyan before they were well out of the hotel.

The last thing he said, as they trailed out of the hotel's portals was, "We'll drive about town, giving you an opportunity to do some snapshots and then possibly to my country dacha where we can have lunch--"

At the car he said, "May I introduce Ana Furtseva, who's been assigned as your guide-interpreter by Intourist
for the balance of your stay? Ana, Mr. John Smith."

Paul shook hands.

She was blond as almost all Russian girls are blond, and with the startling blue eyes. A touch chubby, by Western standards, but less so than the Russian average. She had a disturbing pixie touch around the mouth, out of place in a dedicated revolutionist.

The car took off with Shvernik at the wheel. "You're actually going to have to take pictures as we go along. We'll have them developed later at the plant. I've told them that you are potentially a very big order. Possibly they'll try and assign one of my superiors to your account after a day or two. If so, I suggest that you merely insist that you feel I am competent and you would rather continue with me."

"Of course," Paul said. "Now then, how quickly can our assistance to you get underway?"

"The question is," Shvernik said, "just how much you can do in the way of helping our movement. For instance, can you get advanced type weapons to us?"

The .38 Noiseless slid easily into Paul's hands. "Obviously, we can't smuggle sizable military equipment across the border. But here, for instance, is a noiseless, recoilless hand gun. We could deliver any reasonable amount within a month."

"Five thousand?" Shvernik asked.

"I think so. You'd have to cover once they got across the border, of course. How well organized are you? If you aren't, possibly we can help there, but not in time to get five thousand guns to you in a month."

Ana was puzzled. "How could you possibly get that number across the Soviet borders?" Her voice had a disturbing Slavic throatiness. It occurred to Paul Koslov that she was one of the most attractive women he had ever met. He was amused. Women had never played a great part in his life. There had never been anyone who had really, basically, appealed. But evidently blood was telling. Here he had to come back to Russia to find such attractiveness.

He said, "The Yugoslavs are comparatively open and smuggling across the Adriatic from Italy, commonplace. We'd bring the things you want in that way. Yugoslavia and Poland are on good terms, currently, with lots of trade. We'd ship them by rail from Yugoslavia to Warsaw. Trade between Poland and U.S.S.R. is on massive scale. Our agents in Warsaw would send on the guns in well concealed shipments. Freight cars aren't searched at the Polish-Russian border. However, your agents would have to pick up the deliveries in Brest or Kobryn, before they got as far as Pinsk."

Ana said, her voice very low, "Visiting in Sweden at the Soviet Embassy in Stockholm is a colonel who is at the head of the Leningrad branch of the KGB department in charge of counter-revolution, as they call it. Can you eliminate him?"

"Is it necessary? Are you sure that if it's done it might not raise such a stink that the KGB might concentrate more attention on you?" Paul didn't like this sort of thing. It seldom accomplished anything.

Ana said, "He knows that both Georgi and I are members of the movement."

Paul Koslov gaped at her. "How do you know he hasn't spilled everything? What do you mean he's kept the information to himself so far?"

Ana said, her voice so low as to be hardly heard, "He's my older brother. I'm his favorite sister. How much longer he will keep our secret I don't know. Under the circumstances, I can think of no answer except that he be eliminated."

It came to Paul Koslov that the team on this side could be just as dedicated as he was to his own particular cause.

He said, "A Colonel Furtseva at the Soviet Embassy in Stockholm. Very well. A Hungarian refugee will probably be best. If he's caught, the reason for the killing won't point in your direction."

"Yes," Ana said, her sensitive mouth twisting. "In fact, Anastas was in Budapest during the suppression there in 1956. He participated."

* * * * *

The dacha of Leonid Shvernik was in the vicinity of Petrodvorets on the Gulf of Finland, about eighteen miles from Leningrad proper. It would have been called a summer bungalow in the States. On the rustic side. Three bedrooms, a moderately large living-dining room, kitchen, bath, even a car port. Paul Koslov took a mild satisfaction in deciding that an American in Shvernik's equivalent job could have afforded more of a place than this.

Shvernik was saying, "I hope it never gets to the point where you have to go on the run. If it does, this house is a center of our activities. At any time you can find clothing here, weapons, money, food. Even a small boat on the waterfront. It would be possible, though difficult, to reach Finland."

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"Right," Paul said. "Let's hope there'll never be occasion."

Inside, they sat around a small table, over the inevitable bottle of vodka and cigarettes, and later coffee. Shvernik said, "Thus far we've rambled around hurriedly on a dozen subjects but now we must become definite."

Paul nodded. "You come to us and say you represent the West and that you wish to help overthrow the Soviets. Fine. How do we know you do not actually represent the KGB or possibly the MVD?"

Paul said, "I'll have to prove otherwise by actions." He came to his feet and, ignoring Ana, pulled out his shirt tail, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his pants and unbuckled the money belt beneath. He said, "We have no idea what items you'll be wanting from us in the way of equipment, but as you said earlier all revolutions need money. So here's the equivalent of a hundred thousand American dollars--in rubles, of course." He added apologetically, "The smallness of the amount is due to bulk. Your Soviet money doesn't come in sufficiently high denominations for a single person to carry really large amounts.

He tossed the money belt to the table, rearranged his clothing and returned to his chair. Shvernik said, "A beginning, but I am still of the opinion that we should not introduce you to any other members of the organization until we have more definite proof of your background."

"That's reasonable," Paul agreed. "Now what else?"

Shvernik scowled at him. "You claim you are an American but you speak as good Russian as I do."

"I was raised in America," Paul said, "but I never became a citizen because of some minor technicality while I was a boy. After I reached adulthood and first began working for the government, it was decided that it might be better, due to my type of specialization, that I continue to remain legally not an American."

"But actually you are Russian?"

"I was born here in Leningrad," Paul said evenly.

Ana leaned forward, "Why then, actually, you're a traitor to Russia."

Paul laughed. "Look who's talking. A leader of the underground."

Ana wasn't amused. "But there is a difference in motivation. I fight to improve my country. You fight for the United States and the West."

"I can't see much difference. We're both trying to overthrow a vicious bureaucracy." He laughed again. "You hate them as much as I do."

"I don't know." She frowned, trying to find words, dropped English and spoke in Russian. "The Communists made mistakes, horrible mistakes and--especially under Stalin--were vicious beyond belief to achieve what they wanted. But they did achieve it. They built our country into the world's strongest."

"If you're so happy with them, why are you trying to eliminate the Commmies? You don't make much sense."

She shook her head, as though it was he who made no sense. "They are through now, no longer needed. A hindrance to progress." She hesitated, then, "When I was a student I remember being so impressed by something written by Nehru that I memorized it. He wrote it while in a British jail in 1935. Listen." She closed her eyes and quoted:

"Economic interests shape the political views of groups and classes. Neither reason nor moral considerations override these interests. Individuals may be converted, they may surrender their special privileges, although this is rare enough, but classes and groups do not do so. The attempt to convert a governing and privileged class into forsaking power and giving up its unjust privileges has therefore always so far failed, and there seems to be no reason whatever to hold that it will succeed in the future."

Paul was frowning at her. "What's your point?"

"My point is that the Communists are in the position Nehru speaks of. They're in power and won't let go. The longer they remain in power after their usefulness is over, the more vicious they must become to maintain themselves. Since this is a police state the only way to get them out is through violence. That's why I find myself in the underground. But I am a patriotic Russian!" She turned to him. "Why do you hate the Soviets so, Mr. Smith?"

The American agent shrugged. "My grandfather was a member of the minor aristocracy. When the Bolsheviks came to power he joined Wrangel's White Army. When the Crimea fell he was in the rear guard. They shot him."

"That was your grandfather?" Shvernik said.

"Right. However, my own father was a student at the Petrograd University at that time. Left wing inclined, in fact. I think he belonged to Kerensky's Social Democrats. At any rate, in spite of his upper class background he made out all right for a time. In fact he became an instructor and our early life wasn't particularly bad." Paul cleared his throat. "Until the purges in the 1930s. It was decided that my father was a Bukharinist Right Deviationist, whatever that was. They came and got him one night in 1938 and my family never saw him again."

Paul disliked the subject. "To cut it short, when the war came along, my mother was killed in the Nazi
bombardment of Leningrad. My brother went into the army and became a lieutenant. He was captured by the
Germans when they took Kharkov, along with a hundred thousand or so others of the Red Army. When the Soviets,
a couple of years later, pushed back into Poland he was recaptured."
Ana said, "You mean liberated from the Germans?"
"Recaptured, is the better word. The Soviets shot him. It seems that officers of the Red Army aren't allowed to
surrender."
Ana said painfully, "How did you escape all this?"
"My father must have seen the handwriting on the wall. I was only five years old when he sent me to London to
a cousin. A year later we moved to the States. Actually, I have practically no memories of Leningrad, very few of
my family. However, I am not very fond of the Soviets."
"No," Ana said softly.
Shvernik said, "And what was your father's name?"
"Theodore Koslov."
Shvernik said, "I studied French literature under him."
Ana stiffened in her chair, and her eyes went wide. "Koslov," she said. "You must be Paul Koslov."
Paul poured himself another small vodka. "In my field it is a handicap to have a reputation. I didn't know it had
extended to the man in the street on this side of the Iron Curtain."
* * * * *
It was by no means the last trip that Paul Koslov was to make to his underground contacts, nor the last visit to
the dacha at Petrodvorets.
In fact, the dacha became the meeting center of the Russian underground with their liaison agent from the
West. Through it funneled the problems involved in the logistics of the thing. Spotted through the rest of the vast
stretches of the country, Paul had his local agents, American, British, French, West German. But this was the center.
The Mikoyan Camera made a great success in the States. And little wonder. Unknown to the Soviets, the
advertising campaign that sold it cost several times the income from the sales. All they saw were the continued
orders, the repeated visits of Mr. John Smith to Leningrad on buying trips. Leonid Shvernik was even given a
promotion on the strength of his ably cracking the American market. Ana Furtseva was automatically assigned to
Paul as interpreter-guide whenever he appeared in the Soviet Union's second capital.
In fact, when he made his "tourist" jaunts to the Black Sea region, to the Urals, to Turkestan, to Siberia, he was
able to have her assigned to the whole trip with him. It gave a tremendous advantage in his work with the other
branches of the underground.
Questions, unthought of originally when Paul Koslov had been sent into the U.S.S.R., arose as the movement
progressed.
On his third visit to the dacha he said to Shvernik and three others of the organization's leaders who had
gathered for the conference, "Look, my immediate superior wants me to find out who is to be your top man, the
chief of state of the new regime when Number One and the present hierarchy have been overthrown."
Leonid Shvernik looked at him blankly. By this stage, he, as well as Ana, had become more to Paul than just
pawns in the game being played. For some reason, having studied under the older Koslov seemed to give a personal
touch that had grown.
Nikolai Kirichenko, a higher-up in the Moscow branch of the underground, looked strangely at Paul then at
Shvernik. "What have you told him about the nature of our movement?" he demanded.
Paul said, "What's the matter? All I wanted to know was who was scheduled to be top man."
Shvernik said, "Actually, I suppose we have had little time to discuss the nature of the new society we plan.
We've been busy working on the overthrow of the Communists. However, I thought ..."
Paul was uneasy now. Leonid was right. Actually in his association with both Ana and Leonid Shvernik they
had seldom mentioned what was to follow the collapse of the Soviets. It suddenly occurred to him how
overwhelmingly important this was.
Nikolai Kirichenko, who spoke no English, said in Russian, "See here, we are not an organization attempting to
seize power for ourselves."
This was a delicate point, Paul sensed. Revolutions are seldom put over in the name of reaction or even
conservatism. Whatever the final product, they are invariably presented as being motivated by liberal idealism and
progress.
He said, "I am familiar with the dedication of your organization. I have no desire to underestimate your ideals.
However, my question is presented with good intentions and remains unanswered. You aren't anarchists, I know.
You expect a responsible government to be in control after the removal of the police state. So I repeat, who is to be
your head man?"
"How would we know?" Kirichenko blurted in irritation. "We're working toward a democracy. It's up to the Russian people to elect any officials they may find necessary to govern the country."

Shvernik said, "However, the very idea of a head man, as you call him, is opposed to what we have in mind. We aren't looking for a super-leader. We've had enough of leaders. Our experience is that it is too easy for them to become misleaders. If the history of this century has proven anything with its Mussolinis, Hitlers, Stalins, Chiangs, and Maos, it is that the search for a leader to take over the problems of a people is a vain one. The job has to be done by the people themselves."

Paul hadn't wanted to get involved in the internals of their political ideology. It was dangerous ground. For all he knew, there might be wide differences within the ranks of the revolutionary movement. There almost always were. He couldn't take sides. His only interest in all this was the overthrow of the Soviets.

He covered. "Your point is well taken, of course. I understand completely. Oh, and here's one other matter for discussion. These radio transmitters for your underground broadcasts."

"Here's the problem," Kirichenko said. "As you know, the Soviet Union consists of fifteen republics. In addition there are seventeen Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics that coexist within these basic fifteen republics. There are also ten of what we call Autonomous Regions. Largely, each of these political divisions speak different languages and have their own cultural differences."

Paul said, "Then it will be necessary to have transmitters for each of these areas?"

"Even more. Because some are so large that we will find it necessary to have more than one underground station."

Leonid Shvernik said worriedly, "And here is another thing. The KGB has the latest in equipment for spotting the location of an illegal station. Can you do anything about this?"

Paul said, "We'll put our best electronics men to work. The problem as I understand it, is to devise a method of broadcasting that the secret police can't trace."

They looked relieved. "Yes, that is the problem," Kirichenko said.

* * * * *

He brought up the subject some time later when he was alone with Ana. They were strolling along the left bank of the Neva River, paralleling the Admiralty Building, supposedly on a sightseeing tour.

He said, "I was discussing the future government with Leonid and some of the others the other day. I don't think I got a very clear picture of it." He gave her a general rundown of the conversation.

She twisted her mouth characteristically at him. "What did you expect, a return to Czarism? Let me see, who is pretender to the throne these days? Some Grand Duke in Paris, isn't it?"

He laughed with her. "I'm not up on such questions," Paul admitted. "I think I rather pictured a democratic parliamentary government, somewhere between the United States and England."

"Those are governmental forms based on a capitalist society, Paul."

Her hair gleamed in the brightness of the sun and he had to bring his mind back to the conversation.

"Well, yes. But you're overthrowing the Communists. That's the point, isn't it?"

"Not the way you put it. Let's set if I can explain. To begin with, there have only been three bases of government evolved by man ... I'm going to have to simplify this."

"It isn't my field, but go on," Paul said. She wore less lipstick than you'd expect on an American girl but it went with her freshness.

"The first type of governmental system was based on the family. Your American Indians were a good example. The family, the clan, the tribe. In some cases, like the Iroquois Confederation, a nation of tribes. You were represented in the government according to the family or clan in which you were born."

"Still with you so far," Paul said. She had a very slight dimple in her left cheek. Dimples went best with blondes, Paul decided.

"The next governmental system was based on property. Chattel slavery, feudalism, capitalism. In ancient Athens, for example, those Athenians who owned the property of the City-State, and the slaves with which to work it, also governed the nation. Under feudalism, the nobility owned the country and governed it. The more land a noble owned, the larger his voice in government. I'm speaking broadly, of course."

"Of course," Paul said. He decided that she had more an American type figure than was usual here. He brought his concentration back to the subject. "However, that doesn't apply under capitalism. We have democracy. Everyone votes, not just the owner of property."

Ana was very serious about it. "You mustn't use the words capitalism and democracy interchangeably. You can have capitalism, which is a social system, without having democracy which is a political system. For instance, when Hitler was in power in Germany the government was a dictatorship but the social system was still capitalism."
Then she grinned at him mischievously. "Even in the United States I think you'll find that the people who own a capitalist country run the country. Those who control great wealth have a large say in the running of the political parties, both locally and nationally. Your smaller property owners have a smaller voice in local politics. But how large a lobby does your itinerant harvest worker in Texas have in Washington?"

Paul said, slightly irritated now, "This is a big subject and I don't agree with you. However, I'm not interested now in the government of the United States. I want to know what you people have in store for Russia, if and when you take over."

She shook her head in despair at him. "That's the point the others were trying to make to you. We have no intention of taking over. We have no desire to and probably couldn't even if we did want to. What we're advocating is a new type of government based on a new type of representation."

He noticed the faint touch of freckles about her nose, her shoulders--to the extent her dress revealed them--and on her arms. Her skin was fair as only the northern races produce.

Paul said, "All right. Now we get to this third base of government. The first was the family, the second was property. What else is there?"

"In an ultramodern, industrialized society, there is your method of making your livelihood. In the future you will be represented from where you work. From your industry or profession. The parliament, or congress, of the nation would consist of elected members from each branch of production, distribution, communication, education, medicine--"

"Syndicalism," Paul said, "with some touches of Technocracy."

She shrugged. "Your American Technocracy of the 1930s I am not too familiar with, although I understand power came from top to bottom, rather than from bottom to top, democratically. The early syndicalists developed some of the ideas which later thinkers have elaborated upon, I suppose. So many of these terms have become all but meaningless through sloppy use. What in the world does Socialism mean, for instance? According to some, your Roosevelt was a Socialist. Hitler called himself a National Socialist. Mussolini once edited a Socialist paper. Stalin called himself a Socialist and the British currently have a Socialist government--mind you, with a Queen on the throne."

"The advantage of voting from where you work rather than from where you live doesn't come home to me," Paul said.

"Among other things, a person knows the qualifications of the people with whom he works," Ana said, "whether he is a scientist in a laboratory or a technician in an automated factory. But how many people actually know anything about the political candidates for whom they vote?"

"I suppose we could discuss this all day," Paul said. "But what I was getting to is what happens when your outfit takes over here in Leningrad? Does Leonid become local commissar, or head of police, or ... well, whatever new title you've dreamed up?"

Ana laughed at him, as though he was impossible. "Mr. Koslov, you have a mind hard to penetrate. I keep telling you, we, the revolutionary underground, have no desire to take over and don't think that we could even if we wished. When the Soviets are overthrown by our organisation, the new government will assume power. We disappear as an organization. Our job is done. Leonid? I don't know, perhaps his fellow employees at the Mikoyan Camera works will vote him into some office in the plant, if they think him capable enough."

"Well," Paul sighed, "it's your country. I'll stick to the American system." He couldn't take his eyes from the way her lips tucked in at the sides.

Ana said, "How long have you been in love with me, Paul?"

"What?"

She laughed. "Don't be so blank. It would be rather odd, wouldn't it, if two people were in love, and neither of them realized what had happened?"

"Two people in love," he said blankly, unbelievingly.

Leonid Shvernik and Paul Koslov were bent over a map of the U.S.S.R. The former pointed out the approximate location of the radio transmitters. "We're not going to use them until the last moment," he said. "Not until the fat is in the fire. Then they will all begin at once. The KGB and MVD won't have time to knock them out."

Paul said, "Things are moving fast. Faster than I had expected. We're putting it over, Leonid."

Shvernik said, "Only because the situation is ripe. It's the way revolutions work."

"How do you mean?" Paul said absently, studying the map.

"Individuals don't put over revolutions. The times do, the conditions apply. Did you know that six months before the Bolshevik revolution took place Lenin wrote that he never expected to live to see the Communist take over in Russia? The thing was that the conditions were there. The Bolsheviks, as few as they were, were practically
thrown into power."

"However," Paul said dryly, "it was mighty helpful to have such men as Lenin and Trotsky handy."

Shvernik shrugged. "The times make the men. Your own American Revolution is probably better known to you. Look at the men those times produced. Jefferson, Paine, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, Adams. And once again, if you had told any of those men, a year before the Declaration of Independence, that a complete revolution was the only solution to the problems that confronted them, they would probably have thought you insane."

It was a new line of thought for Paul Koslov. "Then what does cause a revolution?"

"The need for it. It's not just our few tens of thousands of members of the underground who see the need for overthrowing the Soviet bureaucracy. It's millions of average Russians in every walk of life and every strata, from top to bottom. What does the scientist think when some bureaucrat knowing nothing of his speciality comes into the laboratory and directs his work? What does the engineer in an automobile plant think when some silly politician decides that since cars in capitalist countries have four wheels, that Russia should surpass them by producing a car with five? What does your scholar think when he is told what to study, how to interpret it, and then what to write? What does your worker think when he sees the bureaucrat living in luxury while his wage is a comparatively meager one? What do your young people think in their continual striving for a greater degree of freedom than was possessed by their parents? What does your poet think? Your philosopher?"

Shvernik shook his head. "When a nation is ready for revolution, it's the people who put it over. Often, the so-called leaders are hard put to run fast enough to say out in front."

* * * * *

Paul said, "After it's all over, we'll go back to the States. I know a town up in the Sierras called Grass Valley. Hunting, fishing, mountains, clean air, but still available to cities such as San Francisco where you can go for shopping and for restaurants and entertainment."

She kissed him again.

Paul said, "You know, I've done this sort of work--never on this scale before, of course--ever since I was nineteen. Nineteen, mind you! And this is the first time I've realized I'm tired of it. Fed up to here. I'm nearly thirty-five, Ana, and for the first time I want what a man is expected to want out of life. A woman, a home, children. You've never seen America. You'll love it. You'll like Americans too, especially the kind that live in places like Grass Valley."

Ana laughed softly. "But we're Russians, Paul."

"Eh?"

"Our home and our life should be here. In Russia. The New Russia that we'll have shortly."

He scoffed at her. "Live here when there's California? Ana, Ana, you don't know what living is. Why--"

"But, Paul, I'm a Russian. If the United States is a more pleasant place to live than Russia will be, when we have ended the police state, then it is part of my duty to improve Russia."

It suddenly came to him that she meant it. "But I was thinking, all along, that after this was over we'd be married. I'd be able to show you my country."

"And, I don't know why, I was thinking we both expected to be making a life for ourselves here."

They were silent for a long time in mutual misery.

Paul said finally, "This is no time to make detailed plans. We love each other, that should be enough. When it's all over, we'll have the chance to look over each other's way of life. You can visit the States with me."

"And I'll take you on a visit to Armenia. I know a little town in the mountains there which is the most beautiful in the world. We'll spend a week there. A month! Perhaps one day we can build a summer dacha there." She laughed happily. "Why practically everyone lives to be a hundred years old in Armenia."

"Yeah, we'll have to go there sometime," Paul said quietly.

* * * * *

He'd been scheduled to see Leonid that night but at the last moment the other sent Ana to report that an important meeting was to take place. A meeting of underground delegates from all over the country. They were making basic decisions on when to move--but Paul's presence wasn't needed.

He had no feeling of being excluded from something that concerned him. Long ago it had been decided that the less details known by the average man in the movement about Paul's activities, the better it would be. There is always betrayal and there are always counter-revolutionary agents within the ranks of an organization such as this. What was the old Russian proverb? When four men sit down to discuss revolution, three are police spies and the third a fool.

Actually, this had been astonishingly well handled. He had operated for over a year with no signs that the KGB was aware of his activities. Leonid and his fellows were efficient. They had to be. The Commmies had been slaughtering anyone who opposed them for forty years now. To survive as a Russian underground you had to be
No, it wasn't a feeling of exclusion. Paul Koslov was stretched out on the bed of his king-size Astoria Hotel room, his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. He recapitulated the events of the past months from the time he'd entered the Chief's office in Washington until last night at the dacha with Leonid and Ana.

The whole thing.
And over and over again.
There was a line of worry on his forehead.

He swung his feet to the floor and approached the closet. He selected his most poorly pressed pair of pants, and a coat that mismatched it. He checked the charge in his .38 Noiseless, and replaced the weapon under his left arm. He removed his partial bridge, remembering as he did so how he had lost the teeth in a street fight with some Commie union organizers in Panama, and replaced the porcelain bridge with a typically Russian gleaming steel one. He stuffed a cap into his back pocket, a pair of steel rimmed glasses into an inner pocket, and left the room.

He hurried through the lobby, past the Intourist desk, thankful that it was a slow time of day for tourist activity. Outside, he walked several blocks to 25th of October Avenue and made a point of losing himself in the crowd. When he was sure that there could be no one behind him, he entered a pivnaya, had a glass of beer, and then disappeared into the toilet. There he took off the coat, wrinkled it a bit more, put it back on and also donned the cap and glasses. He removed his tie and thrust it into a side pocket.

He left, in appearance a more or less average workingman of Leningrad, walked to the bus station on Nashimson Volodarski and waited for the next bus to Petrodvorets. He would have preferred the subway, but the line didn't run that far as yet.

The bus took him to within a mile and a half of the dacha, and he walked from there.

By this time Paul was familiar with the security measures taken by Leonid Shvernik and the others. None at all when the dacha wasn't in use for a conference or to hide someone on the lam from the KGB. But at a time like this, there would be three sentries, carefully spotted.

This was Paul's field now. Since the age of nineteen, he told himself wryly. He wondered if there was anyone in the world who could go through a line of sentries as efficiently as he could.

He approached the dacha at the point where the line of pine trees came nearest to it. On his belly he watched for ten minutes before making the final move to the side of the house. He lay up against it, under a bush.

From an inner pocket he brought the spy device he had acquired from Derek Steven's Rube Goldberg department. It looked and was supposed to look considerably like a doctor's stethoscope. He placed it to his ears, pressed the other end to the wall of the house.

Leonid Shvernik was saying, "Becoming killers isn't a pleasant prospect but it was the Soviet who taught us that the end justifies the means. And so ruthless a dictatorship have they established that there is literally no alternative. The only way to remove them is by violence. Happily, so we believe, the violence need extend to only a small number of the very highest of the hierarchy. Once they are eliminated and our transmitters proclaim the new revolution, there should be little further opposition."

Someone sighed deeply--Paul was able to pick up even that.
"Why discuss it further?" somebody whose voice Paul didn't recognize, asked. "Let's get onto other things. These broadcasts of ours have to be the ultimate in the presentation of our program. The assassination of Number One and his immediate supporters is going to react unfavorably at first. We're going to have to present unanswerable arguments if our movement is to sweep the nation as we plan."

A new voice injected, "We've put the best writers in the Soviet Union to work on the scripts. For all practical purposes they are completed."

"We haven't yet decided what to say about the H-Bomb, the missiles, all the endless equipment of war that has accumulated under the Soviets, not to speak of the armies, the ships, the aircraft and all the personnel who man them."

Someone else, it sounded like Nikolai Kirichenko, from Moscow, said, "I'm chairman of the committee on that. It's our opinion that we're going to have to cover that matter in our broadcasts to the people and the only answer is that until the West has agreed to nuclear disarmament, we're going to have to keep our own."

Leonid said, and there was shock in his voice, "But that's one of the most basic reasons for the new revolution, to eliminate this mad arms race, this devoting half the resources of the world to armament."

"Yes, but what can we do? How do we know that the Western powers won't attack? And please remember that it is no longer just the United States that has nuclear weapons. If we lay down our defenses, we are capable of being destroyed by England, France, West Germany, even Turkey or Japan! And consider, too, that the economies of some of the Western powers are based on the production of arms to the point that if such production ended, overnight, depressions would sweep their nations. In short, they can't afford a world without tensions."
"It's a problem for the future to solve," someone else said. "But meanwhile I believe the committee is right. Until it is absolutely proven that we need have no fears about the other nations, we must keep our own strength."

Under his hedge, Paul grimaced, but he was getting what he came for, a discussion of policy, without the restrictions his presence would have put on the conversation.

"Let's deal with a more pleasant subject," a feminine voice said. "Our broadcasts should stress to the people that for the first time in the history of Russia we will be truly in the position to lead the world! For fifty years the Communists attempted to convert nations into adopting their system, and largely they were turned down. Those countries that did become Communist either did so at the point of the Red Army's bayonet or under the stress of complete collapse such as in China. But tomorrow, and the New Russia? Freed from the inadequacy and inefficiency of the bureaucrats who have misruled us, we'll develop a productive machine that will be the envy of the world!"

Her voice had all but a fanatical ring.

Someone else chuckled, "If the West thought they had competition from us before, wait until they see the New Russia!"

Paul thought he saw someone, a shadow, at the side of the clearing. His lips thinned and the .38 Noiseless was in his hand magically.

False alarm.

He turned back to the "conversation" inside.

Kirichenko's voice was saying, "It is hard for me not to believe that within a period of a year or so half the countries of the world will follow our example."

"Half!" someone laughed exuberantly. "The world, Comrades! The new system will sweep the world. For the first time in history the world will see what Marx and Engels were really driving at!"

Back at the hotel, toward morning, Paul was again stretched out on the bed, hands under his head, his eyes unseeingly staring at the ceiling as he went through his agonizing reappraisal.

There was Ana.

And there was even Leonid Shvernik and some of the others of the underground. As close friends as he had ever made in a life that admittedly hadn't been prone to friendship.

And there was Russia, the country of his birth. Beyond the underground movement, beyond the Soviet regime, beyond the Romanoff Czars. Mother Russia. The land of his parents, his grandparents, the land of his roots.

And, of course, there was the United States and the West. The West which had received him in his hour of stress in his flight from Mother Russia. Mother Russia, ha! What kind of a mother had she been to the Koslovs? To his grandfather, his father, his mother and brother? Where would he, Paul, be today had he as a child not been sent fleeing to the West?

And his life work. What of that? Since the age of nineteen, when a normal teenager would have been in school, preparing himself for life. Since nineteen he had been a member of the anti-Soviet team.

A star, too! Paul Koslov, the trouble-shooter, the always reliable, cold, ruthless. Paul Koslov on whom you could always depend to carry the ball.

Anti-Soviet, or anti-Russian?

Why kid himself about his background. It meant nothing. He was an American. He had only the faintest of memories of his family or of the country. Only because people told him so did he know he was a Russian. He was as American as it is possible to get.

What had he told such Westerners, born and bred, as Lord Carrol and Derek Stevens? If he wasn't a member of the team, there just wasn't a team.

But then, of course, there was Ana.

Yes, Ana. But what, actually, was there in the future for them? Now that he considered it, could he really picture her sitting in the drug store on Montez Street, Grass Valley, having a banana split?

Ana was Russian. As patriotic a Russian as it was possible to be. As much a dedicated member of the Russian team as it was possible to be. And as a team member, she, like Paul, knew the chances that were involved. You didn't get to be a star by sitting on the bench. She hadn't hesitated, in the clutch, to sacrifice her favorite brother.

Paul Koslov propped the Tracy, the wristwatch-like radio before him, placing its back to a book. He made it operative, began to repeat, "Paul calling. Paul calling."

A thin, far away voice said finally, "O.K. Paul. I'm receiving."

Paul Koslov took a deep breath and said, "All right, this is it. In just a few days we're all set to kick off. Understand?"

"I understand, Paul."
"Is it possible that anybody else can be receiving this?"
"Absolutely impossible."
"All right, then this is it. The boys here are going to start their revolution going by knocking off not only Number One, but also Two, Three, Four, Six and Seven of the hierarchy. Number Five is one of theirs."
The thin voice said, "You know I don't want details. They're up to you."
Paul grimaced. "This is why I called. You've got to make--or someone's got to make--one hell of an important decision in the next couple of days. It's not up to me. For once I'm not to be brushed off with that 'don't bother me with details,' routine."
"Decision? What decision? You said everything was all ready to go, didn't you?"
"Look," Paul Koslov said, "remember when you gave me this assignment. When you told me about the Germans sending Lenin up to Petrograd in hopes he'd start a revolution and the British sending Somerset Maugham to try and prevent it?"
"Yes, yes, man. What's that got to do with it?" Even over the long distance, the Chief's voice sounded puzzled.
"Supposedly the Germans were successful, and Maugham failed. But looking back at it a generation later, did the Germans win out by helping bring off the Bolshevik revolution? The Soviets destroyed them for all time as a first-rate power at Stalingrad, twenty-five years afterwards."
The voice from Washington was impatient. "What's your point, Paul?"
"My point is this. When you gave me this assignment, you told me I was in the position of the German who engineered bringing Lenin up to Petrograd to start the Bolsheviks rolling. Are you sure that the opposite isn't true? Are you sure it isn't Maugham's job I should have? Let me tell you, Chief, these boys I'm working with now are sharp, they've got more on the ball than these Commie bureaucrats running the country have a dozen times over.
"Chief, this is the decision that has to be made in the next couple of days. Just who do we want eliminated? Are you sure you don't want me to tip off the KGB to this whole conspiracy?"
THE END

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**Contents**

SPAWN OF THE COMET
By H. Thompson Rich

Tokyo, June 10 (AP) -- A number of the meteors that pelted Japan last night, as the earth passed through the tail of the Mystery Comet have been found and are puzzling astronomers everywhere.
About the size of baseballs, orange in color, they appear to be of some unknown metal. So far, due to their extreme hardness, all attempts to analyze them have failed.
Their uniformity of size and marking gives rise to the popular belief that they are seeds, and, fantastic though this conception is, it finds support in certain scientific quarters here.
Jim Carter read the news dispatch thoughtfully and handed it back to his chief without comment.
"Well, what do you make of it?"
Miles Overton, city editor of The New York Press, shoved his green eye-shade far back on his bald head and glanced up irritably from his littered desk.
"I don't know," said Jim.
"You don't know!" Overton snorted, biting his dead cigar impatiently. "And I suppose you don't know they're finding the damn things right here in New York, not to mention Chicago, London, Rio and a few other places;" he added.
"Yes, I know about New York. It's a regular egg hunt."
"Egg hunt is right! But why tell me all this now? I didn't see any mention of 'em in your report of last night's proceedings. Did you see any?"
"No, but I saw a lot of shooting stars!" said Jim, recalling that weird experience he and the rest of humanity had passed through so recently.
"Yeah, I'll say!" Overton lit his wrecked cigar and dragged on it soothingly. "Now then, getting back to cases--what are these damn things, anyway? That's what I'd like to know."
"So would I," said Jim. "Maybe they are seeds?"
Overton frowned. He was a solid man, not given to fancies. He had a paper to get out every day and that taxed his imagination to the limit. There was no gray matter left for any such idle musings as Jim suggested. What he
wanted was facts, and he wanted them right away.
"Eggs will do!" he said. "Go out and get one--and find out what's inside it."
"Okay, Chief," said Jim, but he knew it was a large order. "I'll have one on your desk for breakfast!"
Then, with a grave face that denied his light words, he stepped from the city room on that fantastic assignment.

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It was the television broadcast hour and crowds thronged the upper level of Radio Plaza, gazing, intently at the bulletin screen, as Jim Carter emerged from the Press tower.

News from the ends of the earth, in audio-picture form, flashed before their view; but only the reports on the strange meteors from the tail of 1947, IV--so designated by astronomers because it was the fourth comet discovered that year--held their interest. Nothing since the great Antarctic gold rush of '33 had so gripped the public as the dramatic arrival and startling behavior of this mysterious visitant from outer space.

Jim paused a moment, halfway across the Plaza, to take a look at the screen himself.

The substance of the Tokyo dispatch, supplemented by pictures of Japanese scientists working over the baffling orange spheres, had just gone off. Now came a flash from Berlin, in which a celebrated German chemist was seen directing an effort to cut into one of them with an acid drill. It failed and the scientist turned to declare to the world that the substance seemed more like crystal than metal and was harder than diamond.

Jim tarried no longer. He knew where he was going. It was still early and Joan would be up--Joan Wentworth, daughter of Professor Stephen Wentworth, who held the chair of astro-lithology at Hartford University. It was as their guest at the observatory last night that he had seen 1947, IV at close range, as the earth passed through her golden train with that awesome, unparalleled display of fireworks.

Now he'd have the pleasure of seeing Joan again, and at the same time get the low-down from her father on those confounded seeds--or eggs, rather. If anyone could crack one of them, he'd bet Professor Wentworth could.

So, hastening toward the base of Plaza Airport, he took an elevator to ramp-level 118, where his auto-plane was parked, and five minutes later was winging his way to Hartford.

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Throttle wide, Jim did the eighty miles to the Connecticut capital in a quarter of an hour.

Then, banking down through the warm June night onto the University landing field, he retracted the wings of his swift little bus and motored to the foot of Observatory Hill.

Parking outside the Wentworth home, he mounted the steps and rang the bell.

It was answered by a slim, appealing girl of perhaps twenty-two. Hers was a wistful, oval face, with a small, upturned nose; and her clear hazel eyes were the sort that always seem to be enjoying some amusing secret of their own. Her hair was a soft brown, worn loose to the shoulders, after the style then in vogue.

"Joan!" blurted Jim.
"What brings you here at such an hour, Jimmy Carter?" she asked with mock severity.
"You!"
"I don't believe you."
"What then have I come for?"
"You've come to interview father about those meteorites."
"Nonsense! That's purely incidental--a mere by-product, you might say."
"Yes, you might--but I wouldn't advise you to say it to father."
"All right, I won't," he promised, as she led him into the library.

Professor Wentworth rose as they entered and laid aside some scientific book he had been reading. A man of medium height and build, he had the same twinkling hazel eyes as his daughter, though somewhat dimmed from peering at too many stars for too many years.

"Good evening, Jim," he said. "I've rather been expecting you. What is on your mind?"
"Seeds! Eggs! Baseballs!" was the reply, "I don't know what. You've seen the latest television reports, I suppose?" said Jim, noting that the panel on the receiving cabinet across the room was still lit.

"I've seen some of them. Joan has been keeping an eye on the screen mostly, however, while I refreshed my mind on the known chemistry of meteorites. You see, I have a few of those eggs myself, up at the observatory."

"You have?" cried Jim.
He was certainly on the right track!
"Yes. One of my assistants brought them in this afternoon. Would you like to see them?"
"I'll say I would!"
"I rather thought you might," the professor smiled. "Come along, then."
And as Jim turned, he shot a look at Joan, and added:
"You may come too, my dear, if you want."
They went out and up the hill to where the great white dome glistened under the stars, and once inside, Jim Carter of The New York Press was privileged to see two of those strange objects that had turned the world topsy-turvy.

As the Tokyo dispatch and the Berlin television flash had indicated, they were orange in color, about the size of baseballs.

"Weird looking eggs, all right!" said Jim. "What are they made of, anyway?"

"Some element unknown on earth," replied Professor Wentworth.

"But I thought there were only ninety-two elements in the universe and we'd discovered them all."

"So we have. But don't forget this. We are still trying to split the atom, which nature has done many times and will doubtless do many times again. It is merely a matter of altering the valence of the atoms in an old element; whereupon it shifts its position in the periodic scale and becomes a new element. Nature accomplishes this alchemy by means of great heat, which is certainly to be found in a meteor."

"Particularly when it hits the earth's atmosphere!"

"Yes. And now then, I'd like to have you examine more closely this pair I have here."

Jim lifted one and noted its peculiar smoothness, its remarkable weight for its size; he noted, too, that it was veined with concentric markings, like a series of arabesques or fleurs-de-lis.

The professor lifted the other, calling attention to the fact that the size and marking of both were identical, as hitherto reported.

"Also, you'll observe that they are slightly warm. In fact, they are appreciably warmer than when they were first brought in. Curious behavior, this, for new-laid cometary eggs! More like seeds germinating than meteorites cooling, wouldn't you say?"

"But good Lord!" Jim was somewhat taken aback to hear this celebrated scientist apparently commit himself to that wild view. "You don't really think they're seeds, do you?"

"Why not?"

"But surely no seeds could survive the temperature they hit getting here."

"No seeds such as we know, true. But what, after all, do we know of the types of life to be found on other planets?"

"Nothing, of course. Only these didn't come from a planet. They came from a comet."

"And who can say a comet is not a disintegrated planet? Or suppose we take the other theory, that it is an eruption from some sun, ours or another. In any event, who can say no life can survive intense heat? Certainly these seeds—or call them meteorites, if you choose—came through the ordeal curiously unscathed."

"Yes, that's true. Funny, too!"

"And another thing is true, Jim. If by chance they should be seeds, and should germinate, the life they would produce would be something quite alien to our experience, possibly quite inimical to—"

Professor Wentworth broke off abruptly as a startled cry came from Joan, and, turning, they saw her standing with eyes fixed in fascinated horror on the laboratory table.

Following her gaze, Jim saw something that caused his own eyes to bulge. The color of those mysterious orange spheres had suddenly, ominously heightened. They lay glowing there like balls of fire.

"Good God!" he gasped. "Look, Professor! Do you see that?"

Professor Wentworth did not answer but himself stood gazing spellbound at the astounding scene.

Even as they looked, the metal table smoldered under the fiery meteorites and melted, and in a little while the meteorites themselves sizzled from view. Flames licked up from the floor; dense, suffocating fumes rose and swirled through the laboratory.

"Quick!" cried Jim, seizing Joan's arm. "Come on, Professor! Never mind trying to save anything. Let's get out of here!"

They staggered from the laboratory and once outside, plunged down the hill. It was none too soon.

Behind them, as they fled, came suddenly two deafening explosions. Looking back, they saw the roof of the observatory tilt crazily; saw the whole building shatter, and erupt like a volcano.

But that, startling though it was, was not all they saw. For now, as they stood there speechless, two incredible forms rose phoenix-like from the flames—two weird monsters, orange against the red, hideous, nightmarish. They saw them hover a moment above that fiery hell, then rise on batlike wings to swoop off into the night.

Nor was that all. As the awed trio stood there halfway down Observatory Hill, following the flight of that pair of demons, other explosions reached their ears, and, turning to the city below, they saw vivid jets of red leap up here and there, saw other orange wings against the night.
While off across the southeast sky, receding fast, spread the Mystery Comet whose tail had sowed the seeds of this strange life.

Still silent, the trio stood gazing upon that appalling scene for some minutes, while the ruddy shadows of the flaming observatory lit their tense faces.

"Well, the seeds have hatched," said Professor Wentworth at length, in a strained voice. "I am afraid some of the curious who have been gathering those meteorites so eagerly have paid a dear price for them."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," echoed Jim. "We were lucky. If Joan hadn't happened to spot those things just when she did--" He broke off and pressed her hand fondly. "But somehow I can't believe it, even yet. What do you think the things are, Professor?"

"God knows! As I told you, those seeds, should they germinate, would produce something quite alien to our experience; and as I feared, it is a form of life that will not blend well with humanity."

Jim shuddered.

"But look, father!" exclaimed Joan. "They're flying away! They seem to be way up among the stars. Maybe they've left the earth altogether."

Professor Wentworth following his daughter's gaze, saw that many of the monsters were now mere orange pinpoints against the night.

"Let us hope so!" he said fervently.

But in his heart there was no conviction, nor in Jim's, strangely.

On the way back to New York, Jim had plenty to heighten his uneasiness. The scene below him everywhere was red with conflagrations, the sky everywhere orange with the wings of those fiery moths.

More than one swept perilously close, as he pushed his auto-plane on at top speed; but they showed no inclination to attack, for which he was devoutly thankful.

Over the metropolitan area, the scene was one beggaring description. All the five boroughs were a blazing checker-board. New Jersey, Connecticut, Westchester—all were raging. Hundreds of those deadly bombs must have burst in Manhattan alone.

But the fire department there seemed to have the situation in hand, he noticed as he swept down onto the Plaza landing platform.

Leaving his plane with an attendant, he took the first elevator to the street level, and crossing hastily to the Press tower, mounted to the city room.

There absolute pandemonium raged. Typewriters were sputtering, telegraph keys clicking, phones buzzing, reporters coming and going in a steady stream, mingled with the frantic orders of editors, sub-editors, copy readers, composing-room men and others.

Carter fought through the bedlam to the city editor's desk.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you that egg, Chief," he said, with a grim smile. "I had one right in my hand, but it hatched out on me."

Overton looked up wearily. He was a man who had seen a miracle, a godless miracle that restored his faith in the devil.

"Don't talk—just write!" he growled. "I've seen and heard too much to-night. We're all going to hell, I guess—unless we're already there."

But Jim wasn't ready to write yet.

"What's the dope elsewhere? The same?"

"All over the map! We're frying, from coast to coast."

"And abroad?"

"Cooked, everywhere!" He paused, and turned an imploring face to Jim. "Tell me, Carter—what's happening? You've seen Wentworth, I suppose. What he make of it?"

"He—doesn't know."

"God help us! Well, go write your story. If we've got a plant by press time, we'll have something on page one to-morrow—if there's anyone to read it."

By morning the fires in the metropolitan area had been brought under control and it was found that neither the loss of life nor the damage was as great as had at first been feared. Mainly it was the older types of buildings that had suffered the most.

The same thing was true in other parts of the country and elsewhere in the world; and elsewhere, as in New York, people pulled themselves together, cleared up the debris, and went ahead with their occupations. Business was
resumed, and rebuilding operations were begun.

Meanwhile, where were those fiery moths that had sprung so devastatingly from their strange cocoons?

For a while no one knew and it was believed they had indeed winged off into interstellar space, as Joan had suggested that night on Observatory Hill.

Then came rumors that damped these hopes, followed by eye-witness reports that altogether dashed them. The bat-like monsters had flown, not off into space, but to the world's waste-lands.

Strange, it was, the instinct that had led them unerringly to the remotest point of each continent. In North America it was the great Arizona desert, in South America the pampas of Argentina, in Europe the steppes of Russia, in Asia the Desert of Gobi, in Africa the Sahara, in Australia the Victoria; while in the British Isles, Philippines, New Zealand, Madagascar, Iceland, the East Indies, West Indies, South Seas and other islands of the world, the interiors were taken over by the demons, the populace fleeing for their lives.

As for the oceans, no one knew exactly what had happened there, though it was obvious they, too, had received their share of the bombardment on that fateful night; but, while temperatures were found to be somewhat above normal, scientists were of the opinion that the deadly spawn that had fallen there had failed to incubate.

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Immediately the presence of the monsters in the Arizona desert was verified, Overton called Jim Carter to his desk.

"Well, I've got a big assignment for you, boy," he said, rather more gently than was his fashion. "Maybe you know what, huh?"

"You want me to buzz out and interview those birds?"

"You guessed it. And photograph 'em!"

"Okay, Chief," said Carter, though he knew this would be the toughest job yet.

Overton knew it, too.

"It won't be easy," he said. "And it may be dangerous. You don't have to take the assignment unless you want."

"But I want."

"Good! I thought you would." He regarded the younger man admiringly, almost enviously. "Now, about those photos. The Television News people haven't been able to get a thing, nor the War Department--not so much as a still. So those photos will be valuable."

Overton paused, to let that sink in.

"They'll be worth a million, in fact, in addition to what the War Department offers. And to you they'll be worth ten thousand dollars."

"How come?"

"Because that's what the Old Man said."

"Well, I can use it!" said Jim, thinking of Joan.

"All right. Then go to it!"

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Leaving New York late that night, Carter timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the desert just before dawn.

The trip was uneventful till he crossed the Rockies over New Mexico and eased down into Arizona. Then, flying low and fast, he suddenly caught a glow of color off ahead.

For an instant Jim thought it was the dawn, then called himself a fool. For one thing, the glow was in the west, not the east. And for another, altogether more significant, it was orange.

His quarry!

Pulling his stick back hard, he shot like a rocket to ten thousand feet, figuring that a higher altitude, besides giving him a better view of the lay of the land, would be considerably safer.

Winging on now at that height, he saw the orange tide rise higher in the west by seconds, as he rushed toward God knew what eery lair. He suddenly gasped in amazement, as he saw now something so incredible it left him numb.

Below, looming above the on-rushing horizon was a city! But such a city as the brain of man could scarcely conceive, much less execute--a city of some fluorescent orange material, rising tier on tier, level on level, spreading out over the sandy floor of the desert for miles.

And, as Jim draw nearer, he saw, too, that this weird city was teeming with life--terrible life! Thousands of those hideous monsters were working there like an army of ants in a sand-hill--a sand-hill of glistening, molten glass, it seemed from the air.

Were they building their city from the sand of the desert, these hellish glaciers?

Carter decided to find out.
"Well, here goes!" he muttered, diving straight for that dazzling citadel, one hand on the stick, the other gripping the trigger of his automatic camera. "This'll make a picture for the Old Man, all right!"

Off to the east the dawn was breaking, and he saw, as he swept down, its pearly pastel shades blending weirdly with that blinding orange glare.

Pressing the trigger now, he drove his screaming plane on with throttle wide—and yes, it was glass!—glass of some sort, that crazy nightmare down there.

"Whew!" gasped Carter as waves of dazzling heat rose about him. "Boy, but it's hot! I can't stand much of this. Better get out while the getting's good."

But he clenched his teeth, and dove on down to see what those fiery demons looked like. Funny they didn't make any effort to attack. Surely they must see him now.

"Take that, my beauties!—and that!" he gasped, pressing the trigger of his camera furiously.

Then, at a scant two thousand feet, he levelled off, his wings blistering with the heat, and zoomed up again—when to his horror, his engine faltered; died.

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In that agonizing moment it came to Jim that this perhaps was why neither the Television News nor the War Department pilots had been able to get pictures of the hell below.

Had something about that daring heat killed their motors, too, as it had his? Had they plunged like fluttering, sizzling moths into that inferno of orange flame?

"Well, I guess it's curtains!" he muttered.

A glance at his altimeter showed a scant eighteen hundred now. Another glance showed the western boundary of the city, agonizing miles ahead. Could he make it? He'd try, anyway!

So, nursing his plane along in a shallow glide, Jim slipped down through that dazzling heat.

"Got to keep her speed up!" he told himself, half deliriously, as he steadily lost altitude. "Can't pancake here, or I'll be a flapjack!"

At an altitude of less than a thousand he levelled off again, eased on down, fully expecting to feel his plane burst into flames. But though his eyebrows crisped and the gas must have boiled, the sturdy little plane made it.

On a long last glide, he put her wheels down on the sandy desert floor, a bare half mile beyond that searing hell.

The heat was still terrific but endurable now. He dared breathe deeper; he found his head clearing. But what was the good of it? It was only a respite. The monsters had seen him, all right—no doubt about that! Already they were swooping out of their weird citadel like a pack of furious hornets.

On they came, incredibly fast, moving in a wide half-circle that obviously was planned to envelop him.

Tense with horror, like a doomed man at the stake, Jim watched the flaming phalanx advance. And now he saw what they really were; saw that his first, fantastic guess had been right.

They were ants—or at least more like ants than anything on earth—great fiery termites ten feet long, hideous mandibles snapping like steel, hot from the forge, their huge compound eyes burning like greenish electric fire in their livid orange sockets.

And another thing Jim saw, something that explained why the fearful insects had not flown up to attack him in the air. Their wings were gone!

They had molted, were earthbound now.

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There was much food for thought in this, but no time to think. Already the creatures were almost on him.

Jim turned his gaze from them and bent over his dials in a last frantic effort to get his motor started. The instinct of self-preservation was dominant now—and to his joy, suddenly the powerful little engine began to hum with life.

He drew one deep breath of infinite relief, then gave her the gun and whirled off down the desert floor, the enraged horde after him.

For agonizing instants it was a nip-and-tuck race. Then as he felt his wheels lift, he pulled hard back on his stick, and swept up and away from the deadly claws that clutched after him in vain.

Climbing swiftly, Jim banked once, swept back, put the bead full on that scattering half-circle of fiery termites, and pressed the trigger of his automatic camera.

"There, babies!" he laughed grimly. "You're in the Rogues' Gallery now!"

Then, swinging off to the northeast, he continued to climb, giving that weird ant-hill a wide berth.

Funny, about those things losing their wings, he was thinking now. Would they grow them again, or were they on the ground for good? And what was their game out there in the desert, anyway?

Questions Jim couldn't answer, of course. Only time would tell. Meanwhile, he had some pictures that would make the Old Man sit up and take notice, not to mention the War Department.
"They'd better get the Army on the job before those babies get air-minded again!" he told himself, as he winged on into the rising sun. "Otherwise the show they've already staged may be only a little curtain-raiser."

Jim's arrival in the city room of The New York Press that afternoon was a triumphant one, for he had radio-phoned the story ahead and extras were out all over the metropolitan area, with relays flashing from the front pages of papers everywhere.

No sooner had he turned over his precious pictures to the photographic department for development than Overton rushed him to a microphone, and made him repeat his experience for the television screen. But the city editor's enthusiasm died when the negatives came out of the developer.

"There are your pictures!" he said, handing over a bunch of them.

Carter looked at them in dismay. They were all blank--just so much plain black celluloid.

"Over-exposed!" rasped Overton. "A hell of a photographer you are!"

"I sure am!" Jim agreed, still gazing ruefully at the ruined negatives. "Funny, though. The camera was checked before I started. I had the range before I pulled the trigger, every shot." He paused, then added, as though reluctant to excuse himself: "It must have been the heat."

"Yeah. I suppose so! Well, that was damn expensive heat for you, my lad. It cost you ten thousand bucks."

"Yes, but--"

Jim had been going to say it had nearly cost him his life but thought better of it. Besides, an idea had come.

"Give me those negatives!" he said, "I'm going to find out what's wrong with 'em."

And since they were of no use to Overton, he gave them to Jim.

That night again, Jim Carter presented himself at the Wentworth home in Hartford, and again it was Joan who admitted him.

"Oh, Jimmy!" she murmured, as he took her in his arms. "We're all so proud of you!"

"I'm glad someone is," he said.

"But what a fearful risk you ran! If you hadn't been able to get your motor started--"

"Why think of unpleasant things?" he said with a smile.

Then they went into the library, where Professor Wentworth added his congratulations.

"But I'm afraid I didn't accomplish much," said Jim, explaining about the pictures.

"Let me see them," said the professor.

Jim handed them over.

For a moment or two Professor Wentworth examined them intently, holding them this way and that.

"They indeed appear to be extremely over-exposed," he admitted at length. "Your Fire Ants are doubtless radio-active to a high degree. The results could not have been much worse had you tried to photograph the sun direct."

"I thought as much," said Carter, gloomily.

"But possibly the damage isn't irreparable. Suppose we try re-developing a few of these negatives."

He led the way to his study, which since the destruction of the observatory had been converted into a temporary laboratory.

Ten minutes later, Professor Wentworth had his re-developing bath ready in a porcelain basin and had plunged some of the negatives into it.

"This process is what photographers call intensification," he explained. "It consists chemically in the oxidation of a part of the silver of which the image is composed. I have here in solution uranium nitrate, plus potassium ferricyanide acidified with acetic acid. The latter salt, in the presence of the acid, is an oxidizing agent, and, when applied to the image, produces silver oxide, which with the excess of acetic acid forms silver acetate."

"Which is all so much Greek to me!" said Carter.

"At the same time, the ferricyanide is reduced to ferrocyanide," the professor went on, with a smile at Joan, "whereupon insoluble red uranium ferrocyanide is produced, and, while some of the silver, in being oxidized by this process, is rendered soluble and removed from the negative into the solution, it is replaced by the highly non-actinic and insoluble uranium compound."

The process was one quite familiar to photographers experienced in astronomical work, he explained. In fifteen minutes they should know what results they were getting.

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"But when fifteen minutes passed and the negatives were still as black as ever, Jim's hope waned. Not so Professor Wentworth's, however."

"There is a definite but slow reaction taking place," he said after a careful examination. "Either the over-
exposure is even greater than I had suspected, or the actinic rays from your interesting subjects have formed a stubborn chemical union with the silver of the image. In the latter event, which is the theory I am going to work on, we must speed up the reaction and tear some of that excess silver off, if we're ever to see what is underneath."

"But how are you going to speed up the reaction?" asked Jim. "I thought that uranium was pretty strong stuff by itself."

"It is, but not as strong as this new substance we have in combination with the silver here. So I think I'll try a little electrolysis—or, in plain English, electro-plating."

As he spoke, the professor clipped a couple of platinum electrodes to the basin, one at each end. To the anode he attached one of the negatives, to the cathode a small piece of iron.

"Now then, we'll soon see."

He passed a low current into the wires, through a rheostat, with startling results. There was a sudden foaming of the solution and a weird vapor rose from it, luminous, milky, faintly orange.

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For a moment, all they could do was stare.

Then Professor Wentworth switched off the current and stepped toward the tank. Waving away that orange gas, he reached for the cathode and held it up. It was no longer iron, but silver, now.

"Plated, you see!" he exclaimed in triumph.

"Yes, but those fumes!" cried Jim. "Why, they were the same color as the--the Fire Ants, as you call them."

"I know." The professor was not as calm as he pretended. "We have released some of their actinic rays captured by the negative, in prying loose our excess silver. Later I shall repeat the process and capture some of that vapor for analysis. At present, let us have a look at the negative already treated."

He lifted the anode from the solution now, removed the negative, and held it up. A smile of satisfaction broke over his face, followed by a shudder.

"There you are, Jim! Have a look!"

Jim looked, with Joan peering over his shoulder, and his pulses tingled. It was a clear shot of that scattering half-circle of fiery termites, taken after he got away and swept back over them.

"Say, that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"Wonderful--but horrible!" echoed Joan.

"I'll admit they're not much on looks," laughed Carter. "But their homely maps are worth a lot to me--ten thousand dollars, in fact!"

He told her why, and what he proposed to do with the money, and Joan thought it a very good idea.

While this was taking place, Professor Wentworth was re-developing the rest of the negatives. At last all had been salvaged, even those taken in the terrific heat over that weird glass city out there, and Jim was preparing to bear them back to Overton in triumph.

He had thanked the kindly professor from the bottom of his heart, had even told him something of what he had been telling Joan. There remained but to put one last question, then go.

"Summing it all up, what do you make of those nightmares?" he asked. "Do you think they can be destroyed?"

Professor Wentworth did not reply at once.

"I can perhaps answer your question better when I have analyzed this specimen of gas," he said at length, holding up a test-tube in which swirled a quantity of that luminous, milky orange vapor. "But if you wish to quote me for publication, you may say that when I have learned the nature of it, I shall devote all my energies to combating the menace it constitutes."

And that was the message Jim took back with him, but it was the pictures that interested the practical Overton most.

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Before many days, however, Overton, with the rest of the world, was turning anxiously to Professor Wentworth, watching his every move, awaiting his every word. For before many days terrible reports started coming in, not only from the Arizona desert but from the assembly grounds of the Fire Ants everywhere.

Those deadly termites were on the move! They were spreading from their central citadels in ominous, expanding circles--circles that engulfed villages, towns and cities in a swift, relentless ring of annihilation that was fairly stupefying.

In North America, the cities of Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott, with all that lay between, were already gone, their frantic populaces fleeing to the four points of the compass before that fateful orange tide. In South America, Rosario and Cordoba were within the flaming ring and Buenos Aires was threatened. In Europe, Moscow and its vast tributary plain had fallen before the invaders. In Asia, a veritable inland empire was theirs, reaching from Urga to the Khingan Mountains. In Africa, Southern Algeria and French Sudan, with their innumerable small villages and
oases, were overrun. In Australia, Coolgardie had succumbed and Perth was in a panic.

But fearful though the destruction was on the continents, it was the islands of the world that suffered most. First the smallest, those picturesque green gems of the South Seas, crisped and perished. Then came reports of the doom of the Hawaiian group, the Philippines, the East and West Indies, New Zealand, Tasmania and a score of others, their populations perishing by the thousands, as shipping proved unavailable to transport them to safety.

By far the most tragic fate, however, was that suffered by the British Isles. What happened there stunned the world, and brought realization to humanity that unless some miracle intervened, it was but a mirror of the doom that awaited all. For England, Ireland and Scotland were habitable no more. London, Dublin, Glasgow—all their proud cities, all their peaceful hamlets, centuries old, were flaming ruins.

Out of a population, of some sixty millions, it was estimated that at least eight millions must have perished. The rest, by prodigious feats of transportation, managed to reach the mainland, where they spread as refugees throughout an apprehensive, demoralized Europe.

* * * * *

As for the armies and navies of the world, they were powerless before this fiendish invader. Hammered with high explosives, drenched with chemicals, sprayed with machine-gun ballets, the fiery termites surged on unchecked, in ever-widening circles of death.

Lead and steel passed through them harmlessly. Gas wafted off them like air. Despite the frantic efforts of scientists and military men, nothing could be devised to stem that all-devouring orange tide.

It was quite obvious by now, even to the most conservative minds, that the end of human life on earth was not far off. It could only be a few more weeks before the last stronghold fell. Daily, hourly, those deadly Fire Ants were everywhere expanding their fields of operations. Presently all humanity would be driven to the seacoasts, there to perish by fire or water, as they chose.

There were some optimists, of course, who believed that the miracle would happen—that Professor Wentworth or some other scientist would devise some means of repelling the invader before it was too late.

Young Jim Carter of The York Press was not among them, however, though he would have gambled it would be Professor Wentworth if anyone. For what hope was there that any mere man could figure out a weapon that would be effective against such a deadly, such a superhuman foe?

Very little, it seemed, and he grew less and less sanguine, as he continued his frenzied, sleepless work of reporting the unending catastrophes for his paper.

He often thought bitterly of that ten thousand dollars. A lot of good that would do him now!

As for Joan, she faced her fate with fortitude—fortitude and a supreme faith that her father would succeed in analyzing that sinister orange vapor and find the weapon the world waited for.

But agonizing days passed and he did not find it.

Then at last, on the night of August 14th, when Los Angeles and San Francisco were smoldering infernos, along with Reno, Denver, Omaha, El Paso and a score of other great American cities; when Buenos Aires and Santiago were gone, Berlin and Peking and Cairo; when Australia was all one fiery hell—then it was that Professor Wentworth summoned Jim Carter to Hartford.

* * * * *

Hoping against hope, he hurried over.

Once again, Joan ushered him into the house. She was very pale and did not speak.

At her side stood her father. It was he who spoke.

"Good evening, Jim. You have come promptly."

His voice was strained, his face grave. He had aged greatly in the past few weeks.

"Well I'll admit I clipped along. You've--found something?"

Professor Wentworth smiled wanly.

"Suppose you step into my study and see what I have found."

He led the way toward the little makeshift laboratory that for many days and nights had been the scene of his efforts.

It was littered with strange devices now, strangest of all perhaps a huge glass tube like a cannon, mounted on some sort of swivel base.

Ignoring this for the moment, he turned to a smaller tube set upright on a table at the far end of the room. In it, glowed a sinister orange lump that made the whole tube fluorescent. "Behold one of your monsters in captivity!" said the professor, again with a wan smile. "In miniature, of course. What I have done is to condense some of that vapor into a solid."

The process, he explained, was similar to that employed by Madame Curie in obtaining metallic radium--electrolyzing a radium chloride solution with mercury as a cathode, then driving off the mercury by heat in a current
of hydrogen--only he had used the new element instead of radium.

"Incidentally, I have learned that this new element is far more radioactive than radium and possesses many curious properties. Among them, it decomposes violently in water--particularly salt water--producing harmless hydrogen and chloride compounds. So we have nothing to fear from those seeds that fell in our oceans, lakes and rivers."

"Well, that's something, anyway," said Jim. "But have you found any way to combat the ones that have already hatched?"

"Before I answer that question," Professor Wentworth replied, "I shall let you witness a little demonstration."

He advanced to the cannon-like device at the other end of the room, swung it on its swivel till it was pointing directly at that fluorescent orange tube on the table.

"Watch closely!" he said, throwing a switch.

There was a sudden, whining hum in the air and the nib of the big tube glowed a soft, velvety green. Jim gazed at the scene with rapt attention.

"Don't look at that one!" whispered Joan. "Look at the other!"

Jim did so, and saw that its fluorescence was waning.

A moment more the professor held the current on, while the tube grew white. Then he threw off the switch.

"Now let us have a look at our captive," he said, striding over.

They followed, and one glance told Jim what had happened. That sinister lump of orange metal had vanished.

* * * * *

But where was it? That was what he wanted to know.

"A natural question, but not one easy to answer," was Professor Wentworth's reply. "I shall tell you what I have done; then you may judge for yourself."

The cannon-like device which had accompanied the seeming miracle was an adaptation of the cathode tube, whose rays are identical with the beta rays of the atom and consist of a stream of negatively charged particles moving at the velocity of light--186,000 miles a second. These rays, in theory, have the power to combine with the positively charged alpha rays of the atom and drag them from their electrons, causing them to discharge their full quanta of energy at once, in the form of complete disintegration--and it was this theory the professor had acted on.

"But, good Lord--that's splitting the atom!" exclaimed Jim. "You don't mean to say you've done that?"

"I apparently have," was the grave admission. "But do not let it seem such a miracle. Bear in mind, as I have pointed out before, that nature has accomplished this alchemy many times. All radio-active elements are evidences of it. The feat consists merely in altering the valence of the atom, changing its electric charge, in other words. What I have done in the present instance is merely to speed up a process nature already had under way, inasmuch as we are dealing with a radio-active substance."

"But what has happened to the by-product of the reaction?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I have not had time to study that phase of it. Heat, mainly, was produced. Possibly a few atoms of helium. But the substance is gone. That is our chief concern just now."

It was only after abandoning chemical means and turning to physics that he had met with success, he said. Cathode rays had finally proved the key to the riddle.

"But do you think this thing will work on a big scale?" asked Jim regarding that fragile tube doubtfully.

Professor Wentworth hesitated before replying.

"I do not know," he admitted, "but I intend to find out--to-night."

* * * * *

Jim looked at him in amazement. "To-night?"

"Yes. Or rather, the experiment will be at dawn. If successful, this continent at least will be rid of the menace."

Jim's amazement turned to incredulity and a sudden fear gripped him. Had the strain of the past few weeks unbalanced the professor's mind?

"But surely you can't hope to wipe them out with one tube. Why, it would take hundreds."

"No, only one. You see, I am going to place the tube in the center of the circle and direct its rays outward toward the circumference in a swinging radius."

Whereupon, for a moment, Jim's fear seemed confirmed.

"But, good God!" he exclaimed. "It couldn't possibly be that powerful, could it?"

"I think it can be made to be," was Professor Wentworth's grave assurance. "The greatest power we know in the universe is radiant energy, which reaches us from the sun and the stars, traveling at the speed of light."

"Like light rays, these heat rays can be focused, directed; and the beta rays of the cathode, traveling at the same velocity, can be made to ride these rays of radiant heat much as electric power rides radio waves. The giant, in short, can be made, to carry the dwarf, with his deadly little weapon. That, at least, is the theory I am acting on."
This somewhat allayed Jim's fears--fears that vanished when the professor went on to explain somewhat the working of his mechanism.

"But how are you going to get the thing out there?" he asked, picturing with a shudder the center of the flaming hell.

"I imagine the War Department will provide me with a volunteer plane and pilot for the purpose," was the calm reply.

"And you will go?"

"Yes, I will go."

Jim debated, but not for long.

"Well, you needn't trouble the War Department. Here's your volunteer pilot! The plane's outside. When do we start?"

"But, my dear young man!" objected the professor. "I cannot permit you to make this sacrifice. It is suicide, sheer suicide."

"Is my life any more precious than yours, or that of some volunteer Army pilot?" Jim asked him.

"But there is Joan. If I fail--she must depend on you."

"If you fail, Professor, Joan won't need me or anyone, for long. No, I go. So let's chuck the argument and get ready."

"Oh, Jimmy!" sobbed Joan. "Jimmy!"

But her eyes, as they met his mistily, were lit with a proud splendor.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Jim Carter's little auto-plane lifted into the night, and, with that precious tube mounted above the cabin, winged swiftly westward.

As on his former foray into that fiery realm, Jimmy timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the Arizona desert just before dawn. Somewhere in that great sandy waste, they felt, there would be a place to set the plane down and get the ray going.

Professor Wentworth had broadcast the particulars of his tube to his scientific colleagues wherever humanity still remained, and the eyes of the world were on this flight. If successful, swift planes would bear similar tubes to the centers of the devastated regions elsewhere, and sweep outward with their deadly rays. The earth would be rid of this fiery invader. If it were not successful....

Jim preferred not to think of that, as he drove on into the night.

Crossing the Missouri River at dark and deserted Kansas City, they soon saw the eastern arc of that deadly orange circle loom on the horizon. To get over it safely, Jim rose to twenty thousand feet, but even there the heat, as they sped across the frontier into enemy territory, was terrific.

Anxiously he watched his revs and prayed for his motor to hold up. If it stopped now, they were cooked!

The sturdy engine purred on with scarcely a flutter, however, and soon they were behind the lines, in a region pitted with the smoldering fires of towns and cities.

It made them shudder, it presented such an appalling panorama of ruin. But at the same time, it strengthened their hope. For very few flares of orange gleamed now among the red. The main forces of the invader were at the front. That meant there should be a safe place to land somewhere.

* * * * *

An hour later, some miles beyond that weird glass citadel that had been their objective, they found a wide stretch of empty desert, and there Jim brought the little plane down to a faultless landing, just as dawn was lightening the east.

Stepping out, he drew a deep breath of relief. For had he crashed, or smashed that fragile tube, all would have been in vain.

"Well, here we are!" he exclaimed, grimly cheerful, as Professor Wentworth stepped out after him. "Now let's--"

Then he broke off, horrified, as he saw another figure follow the professor from the cabin.

"Joan!" he gasped.

"Present!" she replied.

"But, my daughter!" the professor's voice broke in. "My dear child! A sob shook him. "Why, why, this is--"

"Please don't let's talk about it!" she begged, giving his arm a little pat. "I'm here and it can't be helped now. I was only afraid you'd find me before it was too late and take me back."

Then, edging over to Jim and slipping her arm in his, she murmured:

"Oh, my dear! Don't you see I couldn't stay behind? I had to be with you at the end, Jimmy, if--"

"It won't be!" he cried, pressing her cold hand. "It can't be!"
Then he turned to give his attention to her father, who had already mounted to the cockpit and was working absorbedly over his mechanism in the pale light of the coming day.

Any moment, Jim knew, those flaming termites might discover them, and come swooping down. With keen eyes he scanned the horizon. No sign of them yet.

"How are you up there?" he called.
"About ready," was the reply. "But I shall want more light than this for my mirrors."

Tensely, counting the seconds, they waited for the sunrise....

And now, as they waited, suddenly a sinister tinge of orange suffused the rosy hues of the east.

"The Fire Ants!" cried Joan, shrinking. "They've seen us! They're coming!"

It was true, Jim saw with a heavy heart.

Turning to Professor Wentworth, he gasped out:
"Quick! We've got to do something! You've no idea how fast they move!"

"Very well." The professor's voice was strangely calm. "You may start your motor. I shall do what I can. Though if we only had the sun--"

Jim leaped for the cabin.

A touch of the starter and the powerful engine came in. Braking his wheels hard, to hold the plane on the ground, he advanced the throttle as much as he dared, and sent a high-tension current surging through the wires the professor had connected with his tube above.

Soon came that high, whining hum they had heard in the laboratory--a thousand times magnified now--and the nib of the big tube glowed a livid, eery green in the lemon dawn.

"Joan!" called her father sharply. "Get in the cabin with Jim!"

She did so, her eyes still fixed in horrified fascination on the eastern horizon; and in that tense instant, she saw two things. First, a great orange arc of fiery termites, bearing down on them; and second, another arc, far greater--the vast saffron rim of the rising sun.

Those two things Joan saw--and so did Jim--as their eardrums almost burst with the stupendous vibration that came from the gun in the cockpit. Then they saw a third, something that left them mute with awe.

As Professor Wentworth swung his cannon ray upon that advancing horde, it melted, vanished, leaving only the clear yellow of the morning sunlight before their bewildered eyes.

But the professor did not cease. For five minutes--ten, fifteen--he swung that mighty ray around, stepping up its power, lengthening its range, as it reached its invisible, annihilating arm farther and farther out....

Meanwhile Jim was radio-phoning frantically. The air seemed strangely full of static.

At last he got Overton of The New York Press.
"Carter speaking, out in Arizona," he said. "Getting any reports on the ray?"

And back came the tremendous news:
"Results! Man, the world's crazy! They're gone--everywhere! Tell the professor to lay off, before he sends us scooting too."

"Right!" said Jim, cutting his motor. "More later!"

And to Professor Wentworth he called:
"All right, that's enough! That ray was stronger than you knew!"

But there came no answer, and mounting to the wing-tip, Joan following, Jim saw a sight that froze him with horror. They beheld the professor, slumped against the tube, his whole body glowing a pale, fluorescent green.

"Father!" screamed Joan, rushing to his side. "Oh, Father!"

The man stirred, motioned her away, gasped weakly:
"Do not touch me, child--until the luminosity goes. I am highly radio-active. I had no time to--insulate the tube. No time to find out how. Had to--hurry--"

His voice waned off and they knew he was dead. The two stood there stunned by the realization of his great sacrifice.

He and Joan had set forth on this venture knowing they stood at least a chance, thought Jim, but Professor Wentworth had known from the start that it was sure death for him.

The sun stood out above the eastern horizon like a huge gold coin, bright with the promise of life to spend, when Jim and Joan took off at last for the return home; but the radiance of the morning was dimmed by the knowledge of the tragic burden they bore.

For some moments, as they winged on, both were silent.
"Look!" said Jim at length. "Look ahead, Joan!"
She looked, brightened somewhat.
"Yes, I see."
And after a moment, lifting her hazel eyes to his, she said. "Oh, Jimmy, I'm sure it means happiness for us."
"Yes, I'm sure!"
She stirred, moved closer.
"Jimmy, you--you're all I have now."
He made no reply, save to press her trembling hand. But it was enough.
Silently, understandingly, they winged onward into the morning light.

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Contents

RUNAWAY
By Joseph Samachson

Heroism is merely daring and ingenuity--at the age of ten--experience can come later!

A thin speck appeared in the visor plate and grew with sinister and terrifying speed. Bursts of flame began to play around the rocketing spaceship, the explosions hurling it from side to side as it twisted and turned in a frantic effort to escape. Rogue Rogan, his vicious lips compressed, his glittering evil eyes narrowed, heart pounding, knew that this was it.

This was the day of retribution, he had so long feared....

* * * * *

"Plato!"
Plato leaped to his feet and slid the book under the pillow. Then he seized a textbook at random, and opened it wide. His eyes fastened themselves to the print, seizing upon the meaningless words as if they would save him from a retribution that Rogue Rogan had never had to fear.

The dorm master frowned from the doorway. "Plato, didn't you hear the Assembly bell?"

"Assembly?" Plato's eyes looked up in mild astonishment. "No, sir, I didn't hear any bell. I was so absorbed in my studying, sir--" He shut the book and placed it back with the others. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm willing to accept my punishment."

The dorm master studied the little martyr's expression. "You'd better be, Plato. Now live up to your name and show some intelligence. Run along to Assembly."

Plato ran, but he also winced. How he had suffered from that miserable name of his! Even before he had known that the original Plato had been a philosopher, even before he had been capable of understanding what a philosopher was, he had been able to see the amused expression in the eyes of those who heard his name, and had hated them for it. "Show a little intelligence, Plato." Why couldn't they have given him a name like the others? There were so many ordinary, commonplace, manly names from which they might have chosen. Jim, Jack, George, Tom, Bill--anything would have been better than Plato. And infinitely better than what he was sometimes called by his equals--"Plato, the dopy philosopher."

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He slipped into his seat in the Assembly quietly, so as not to interrupt the droning of the principal. So they thought his name was funny, did they? Let them laugh at him. He was only ten now, but some day he would really act like a man. Some day it would be he himself, and not a fictional hero like Comets Carter, who would be adventuring on strange planets of unknown suns, tracking down the Rogans and the other criminals who sought refuge in the wide reaches of galactic space.

Some day--and then the thought burst on him like a nova exploding in his brain.

Why not now?

Why not indeed? He was smart; he could take care of himself. Even his masters admitted that, when they weren't carping at him for his daydreaming. Take that model of a spaceship they had brought to school one day, with a retired astrogator to explain to the pupils how the thing was run, and how it avoided stray meteors. He had sat
down at the controls, and even the astrogator had been surprised at how confidently he took over the role of pilot, how he got the idea at once.

He could do as well in real life. He was sure of it. Give him a really worthwhile problem to work on, instead of these silly questions about square roots and who discovered the third satellite of Mars, and he'd show them.

"Thus," declared the principal, "you will be prepared to take up your duties--"

"Norberts to you," thought Plato. "I'm going to run away."

Where to? There were so many stars to go to, such a bewildering number of planets and asteroids.

Plato sat lost in thought. A planet whose habitation required a spacesuit was out of the question. Spacesuits his size were hard to get. The sensible thing would be to choose a place where the physical conditions, from gravity to atmospheric pressure and composition would tend to resemble those here on Venus or on Earth. But full of the most thrilling danger.

A boy's voice said, "Get up, you dopy philosopher. It's all over."

He raised his head and realized that the principal had stopped droning from the platform, that all the pupils were standing up to leave. He stood up and marched out.

When the signal for lights out came that night, Plato lay motionless for a time in the dark, his mind racing far too rapidly for him to think of sleep. He had plans to make. And after a time, when the dormitory quieted down, he went to the well of knowledge for inspiration. He slipped on his pair of goggles and threw the special switch he himself had made. The infra-red light flared on, invisible to any one in the room but himself, and he drew his book from its hiding place and resumed his reading.

* * * * *

The ship curvetted in space like a prancing steed. Panic-stricken by the four-dimensional space-warp in which he was trapped, Rogue Rogan stormed at his terrified followers. "By all the devils of the Coal Sack," he shouted, "the man doesn't live who can take me alive! You'll fight and die like men, you hen-hearted cowards...."

* * * * *

But they didn't die like men. In fact, they didn't die at all, and Plato permitted a slight sneer to play across his youthful features. Though he considered himself a passionate admirer of Comets Carter, even he felt dissatisfied with the story. When they were trapped, they were never really trapped. Comets Carter, sterling hero that he usually was, always showed weakness of intellect at the last moment, giving his deadly enemy an incredibly simple way out, one that Comets had, in his own incredibly simple way, overlooked.

Plato would never be guilty of such stupidity. He himself--and now he was Comets Carter, a quicker-thinker, smarter Carter, dealing out to Rogue Rogan a retribution many eons overdue. He was whistling through space at ten light-speeds. He was compressing light-centuries into a single second. He was--

He had just time to slip the goggles from his face before his eyes closed in sleep.

* * * * *

During the day, he continued to make his plans. There was a spaceport a hundred and forty miles away. At night, if the students poked their heads out of the window, they could see the distant ships as points of flame racing away into the darkness, like shooting stars in reverse. He would steal out of his room in the night, take a glider-train to the spaceport, and stow away. It would be as simple as that.

Of course, he needed money. He might travel at half fare, but even that would be expensive. And then there was the matter of food. He'd have to stay hidden until the spaceship took off and there was no turning back, and at the thought of crouching in some dark hold, motionless for hours, cramped, and with an empty stomach--

He wasn't going to starve himself. Even Comets Carter couldn't have gone without eating and got very far in his pursuit of Rogan. Plato would have to acquire money for flight, fare and food.

The book, of course, he couldn't think of selling. It was only a decicredit novel in the first place, and somewhat worn at that. And the other students would have laughed at him for reading it. But his infra-red bedside lamp and his goggles and the space-receptor radio he had built out of spare parts--those should bring him enough to travel and live on for a few days.

He made his first sale in the free time that evening, to a young squirt in the neighboring dormitory who had a passion akin to his own. He liked to listen to tales of high adventure, of the kind the radiocasters loved and the teachers in the school frowned upon. Having arrived here from Earth only six months before, he had difficulty adjusting to the type of derring-do featured on the Venus stations, and he lacked a space-receptor that would bring him his favorites from the next planet. He snapped up, at the bargain price of ten credits, the receptor that Plato offered.

There was a little difficulty with the infra-red lamp and goggles. The customer Plato had selected turned out to be rather suspicious. He demanded, "Where did you steal them?"

Plato explained patiently, "I didn't steal them. I made them myself."
"That's a lot of hot oxo-nitrogen. You hooked them some place, and if they ever find out--"

"Okay," said Plato, "if you don't want them, you don't have to take them. I can sell them to somebody else."

He allowed the young skeptic to try the goggles on and read by the light of the lamp. He knew little of the psychology of salesmanship, but with what might be called Platonic shrewdness, he sensed that once the prospect had experienced the joys of using the magic articles, he would never give them up.

The method worked. And soon Plato was richer by fifteen credits, instead of the ten or twelve he had hoped for. He had a few other odds and ends, which he sold for as much as they would bring. After all, once he was out in space, he wouldn't need them any more.

* * * * *

In the middle of the next day, when the bell sounded the end of the class on Planetary Geography and it was time to go to the class on Animal Physiology, Plato picked himself up and walked out. One of the 'copter custodians looked at him suspiciously, but Plato didn't dignify the man by paying him direct attention.

He muttered to himself, "Always picking on me. I don't see why he can't send somebody else on his errands." It was better than the forged pass signed with the headmaster's name.

The pass itself came in handy when he bought a flight ticket. The ticket agent also stared at him suspiciously, but Plato was ready for him. He had prepared the slip of paper beforehand, tracing the headmaster's name laboriously from one of the lists of regulations attached to the wall.

To make pursuit as difficult as possible for any one who tried to trail him, Plato asked for a ticket not to Space Junction, where he was going, but to Venusberg, in the opposite direction. Both tickets cost about the same; the ticket to Venusberg, in fact, cost three decicredits more. Once on the plane-drawn glider, he could explain to the conductor that the agent had made a mistake and offer the ticket he had. Since the company would lose nothing by the transaction, there was no reason why the conductor should object.

Plato was proud of this bit of trickery, and he flattered himself that by means of it he had entirely thrown off pursuit. It must be remembered that he was only ten years old.

On the glider-flight, he found himself sitting next to a middle-aged woman who wore glasses and was surrounded by packages. She beamed at him, as she did at every one else around her, and Plato shrank back into his seat. If there was anything he didn't want on this trip, it was to be mothered.

But he couldn't escape her. She said, "My, my, you're awfully young to be traveling alone. This the first time?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Plato nervously, afraid of the embarrassing questions he could read on her face.

Hastily he stared out over the side and gasped, "Gee, how small everything is!"

Imagine anyone who had traveled vicariously through space with Comets Carter being awed by a flight in a plane-drawn glider! But the ruse worked.

She said, "Yes, it is frightening, isn't it? Even worse than space travel."

"You've been in space, ma'am?"

"Bless your heart, I've been in space more times than you could shake a stick at. The takeoff isn't so nice, I'll admit, but after that you're just sailing free. What are you going to be when you grow up?"

They had his future all planned for him, but he knew that he wasn't going to be any of the things they wanted him to be.

He said boldly, "A space explorer."

She laughed. "You youngsters are all alike inside, no matter how different you seem. My boy was the same way when he was young. But he got over it. A space explorer, no less!"

* * * * *

Plato didn't answer. It was only a half hour's trip, and the conductor was walking down the aisle. Plato found it difficult to take his eyes off him. He was afraid that the man would take a look at his ticket, say, "Wrong plane, son," and turn him over to the stationmaster at Space Junction, to be shipped back.

In his nervousness, Plato had difficulty getting his ticket out of his pocket. As he had expected, the conductor said, "You're on the wrong flight."

The motherly woman exclaimed, "Oh, isn't that a shame! Are they waiting for you in Venusberg?"

Plato said tearfully, "Yes, ma'am." The tearfulness wasn't hard to manage; he'd learned the trick at school.

"That's too bad. How are you going to get there?"

"I don't know. I had just enough money to pay for this ticket."

"Doesn't the company correct mistakes, Conductor?"

"Not mistakes the passengers make," said the conductor sourly. "I'm sorry, boy, I'll have to take that ticket."

The woman's eyes flashed and, as the conductor moved on, she said, "The nasty thing. They have no consideration at all. Look, child." For a moment Plato thought she was going to offer him flight fare from Space Junction to Venusberg, but she was not, he discovered, as motherly as that. "You know what you'll do when you get
off? Send a ‘gram, collect, to your people in Venusberg. They’ll wire you your fare. And you’ll reach them in a couple of hours.”

"Thank you, ma’am," he said, not feeling thankful at all. So it was all right to be sympathetic, he thought indignantly, up to the point where sympathy might cost her money. Like most people, she was free-handed only with advice.

Who wanted advice?

* * * * *

At Space Junction he waved her a shy farewell, and then turned and disappeared into the station crowd.

At the takeoff grounds, his heart sank. As he might have expected, the entrance to the space tarmac was well guarded. How was he going to become a stowaway on a spaceship if he couldn’t even get close to it?

He wandered around outside, staring through the charged wire fence at the crowds, the spacemen, the ships inside. They were gigantic shining things, those wonderful ships, each so long that he realized for the first time how far away they must have been and how rapidly they must have traveled, for those he saw had seemed to him like shooting stars. They were pointed almost straight up. Near the stern of each ship was a vacuum-pit to absorb the radioactive exhaust gases.

His eye caught an old tub, its shininess dulled, its hull faintly scarred. Just such a ship, he thought with a thrill, as the one on which Comets Carter had been shanghaied on that momentous occasion when ...

* * * * *

The old freighter swung a great circle, its torsion jets blasting desperately in an effort to keep it on an even keel. This, thought Comets Carter, was it. This was the foul revenge that Rogue Rogan had planned, the evil death he had plotted with his unhuman companions. In a moment the pulsating radiations of electroid rays would set off the cargo of ghoulite, and when the interplanetary echoes of the explosion died away, Comets Carter would be no more than a series of photon packets, his body torn apart, his very atoms converted into radiation that was hurtling with the speed of light to the far corners of the universe....

* * * * *

It hadn’t happened that way, of course. But if it had happened--well, it might have on just such a tub as this. A guard saw him peering through the fence, and said, "What are you looking at, kid?"

"Those ships," said Plato, honestly enough. And then he added, to throw the man off the track, "Gee, I'd be scared to go up in one of them. No, sir, you couldn't get me into one of them for a million credits."

The man laughed. "They're not for the likes of you. A lot of those ships go to other stars."

"Other stars? Gosh! Does that little one, the Marie T.--"

"That tub? Just an interplanetary freighter. But even that isn't for you. Now run along and mind your own business."

Plato was happy to run along. Unfortunately, he realized, running along didn't help him to get past the fence. And then he had a fear-inspiring thought. He couldn't tell an interplanetary ship from an interstellar. What if he did manage, somehow, to get in and stow away--and then found himself on a ship bound for no more distant port than Earth, from which he could easily be sent home in disgrace? It sent a shiver through him. Fortunately, it also stimulated his mind. After all, there were such things as newspapers, and the school, nuisance in many ways though it was, had taught him to read.

* * * * *

He bought a paper and turned at once to the shipping news section. As he had hoped, every ship was listed. He checked off some of the names he had glimpsed on the field, and found happily that their destinations were printed in the most routine manner.

There still remained the question of how to get past the guards. This, he suddenly realized, was a question impossible to solve on an empty stomach. It had been many hours since he had eaten lunch.

There were a dozen restaurants in the spaceport, and he selected one carefully, studying the illuminated menus and the prices before daring to enter. If that motherly old woman had been as kind-hearted as she pretended to be, he wouldn’t have had to worry so much about prices. As it was, he knew that he had money enough for only two days, and after that--his stomach could complain all it wanted to, it would have to go unfed.

He chose from the menu only items that he never tasted at school--dishes made from real plant and animal life, with just enough synthetics to give them flavor. He couldn't say that he liked what he ate, but at least it gave him the feeling of being on his own, of having made the break with his tame past as complete as possible. Earth-beef tasted too strong; Venus seaweed stew had a pungency that he didn't like.

He finished his plate only because he had been taught that to leave food over was wasteful. And for the first time he began to wonder what they would feed him on the spaceship. Suppose he got on one that wasn’t scheduled to make port for five years--and all he received to eat was stuff like this? The thought made him shudder. Here was a
hardship of space travel that the books he read had never mentioned.

After eating, he slumped back in his chair. He hadn't realized he was so completely exhausted until a hand shook his shoulder. Then he awoke with a start.

A waiter said, "This is no place to sleep, youngster."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was tired and I didn't realize."

"You been here for a long time. Waiting for someone?"

"Yes, sir. Something must have held him up."

"Seems to me that I noticed you walk in here about three hours ago. That's a long time to wait."

"That's what I thought, sir. I can't understand what happened."

"Well, you can't hang around here. I'll tell you what I'll do, though. I'll turn you over to the matron in our Lost and Found room, and she'll look out for you. Follow me."

* * * * *

In a daze, Plato followed. But as his feet were set into motion, so was his brain. By now, of course, the search for him must be well on. They must have traced him to the station, and perhaps, despite his clever trick with the ticket, they had found the flight he had taken. For all he knew, they might be waiting for him in the Lost and Found room, ready to seize him the moment he showed his face there.

He hadn't gone so far to be recaptured so easily. As they passed an exit door, Plato darted out. He heard the waiter's surprised shout, but he didn't wait to reply. In a second, he had lost himself in the crowd.

He knew now that if he was going to get aboard an interstellar vessel, he would have to do so soon. What would Comets Carter have done in Plato's place—if Comets had been in one of his brighter moods? And then he had it. He saw a messenger coming down the street, gleaming in his uniform, and, somewhat nervously, approached him.

"May I speak to you?" asked Plato, with school-taught politeness.

"What about, bud? I'm busy."

"Well, I've been wanting to get Captain Halverson's autograph. He's on the Space Symphony--"

"So what?"

"Well, the thing is, they won't let me past the gate. So I thought that if I wore a messenger's uniform--"

The other boy glared at him. "Are you off your Norbert? I wouldn't let you wear this uniform for a zillion credits."

Plato swallowed nervously, and said in desperation, "I don't have a zillion credits, but I've got eight, and I'll give them to you if you let me wear it. Just half an hour, that's all it'll take. It's the last chance I'll have to ask him. He's bound for Rigel, and he won't be back for five years, and you see--"

His voice tapered to a thin, tearful squeak as the messenger looked at him.

"You're offering me eight space-lousy credits?"

"It's all I have. We'll just change clothes for a few minutes, and that'll be all. Please, I've got to see him. I know that if I do, he'll give me his autograph."

"Okay," said the messenger unexpectedly. "But hurry back. I'll be at the gate waiting for you."

* * * * *

As they exchanged clothes, Plato was almost feverish with excitement. But he knew that if he expected to get past the guard, he would have to control himself. The clothes didn't fit too well, even though the messenger was small, and he must do nothing that would arouse the guard's suspicion.

He said to the messenger, "Gee, thanks. You don't know how much this means to me." And then, with a mental grip on himself so tense that it hurt physically, he approached the guard, and said casually, "Earth 'gram for Captain Halverson."

The guard hardly looked at him. He was past the gate!

He had been tricky again. Once out of sight of the guard, he made not for the Space Symphony, but for the Long Ranger, bound for Aldebaran.

"Earth 'gram for Captain Brinjar," he muttered, doing his best to look bored, as if delivering 'grams to ships was an old thing to him. And then he was aboard!

It was not quite what he expected. The smooth walls were such as he might have found in his own dormitory. The quarters, he saw, were cramped, although for someone his size they were at least adequate. And the passageways, although brilliantly lighted, were mere narrow tunnels.

From the main passageway, other tunnels branched off bewilderingly, and Plato hesitated until he realized that his very confusion gave him an excuse for poking his nose into all sorts of places. He followed one of the tunnels until he came to a door: ENGINE ROOM—KEEP OUT.

He entered. A mechanic looked up.

"Earth 'gram for Captain Brinjar. They said he was around here."
"Not here," replied the mechanic. "Try the cargo hold."

Plato backed out and set off down the corridor again, noting the direction arrows and signs. TO MAIN LOUNGE--no good. TO CAPTAIN'S CABIN--worse. He didn't want to find the captain and lose his excuse for being there.

And then he saw TO FOOD STORAGE and knew that he need look no further. This was a place both to hide and to eat, until the ship took off, and the crew found him, and had to accept him as one of themselves.

He opened the door to the food storage hold with an elaborate caution that turned out to be unnecessary. There was no one inside. He settled down between two packing cases and let out his breath. He had made it. He had stowed away successfully, and in a few hours he would be out in space, traveling between the stars, fighting, adventuring--

A yawn almost wiped the smile off his face.

* * * * *

He awoke to disaster. The captain and Plato's dorm master were standing there, staring down at him, and the dorm master was saying, "All right, Plato, you've had your adventure, and now I'm afraid you'll have to pay for it. It's time to go home."

Plato couldn't move. It was impossible, after he had been so clever, so ingenious, and had thrown them off the trail in so many ways, for them to have found him!

"You shouldn't have bought a ticket to the wrong station," said the dorm master, somewhat amusedly. "When the conductor turned it in, the only one of its kind on his flight, it naturally attracted attention. We hadn't even suspected you had taken a glider-train until the flight people came to us."

Now he would never adventure on strange planets of unknown suns. He would never course through space like Comets Carter. He would never have the adventures which alone made life seem worth living.

Unable to control himself, he burst into tears. It was a completely unmanly thing to do, but he couldn't help himself. The tears flowed down over his cheeks, washing away all his shattered illusions. He would never dream such dreams again. From now on, it would be useless. They would be watching him carefully to make sure that he didn't leave the planet.

He heard the captain say in astonishment, "I didn't know these young ones could cry like that."

"Of course they cry," replied the dorm master. "They eat, sleep, cry--almost like you and me, Captain. And worst of all, they even have their dreams. That's why I sometimes wonder, Captain, if it isn't a mistake to send them to school."

"They have to learn."

"Granted," agreed the dorm master somberly. "But not to dream of being human when they're only androids."
Once upon a time life was perfection. Government made sure its citizens were supplied with every comfort and pleasure. But sometimes perfection breeds boredom and ...

Allen Kinderwood slowed his pace so his forelock would quit bobbing. The damn thing wasn't supposed to bob; it was supposed to be a sort of peaked crest above rugged, handsome features--a dark lock brushed carelessly aside by a man who had more important things to do than fuss with personal grooming. But no matter how carefully he combed it and applied lusto-set, it always bobbed if he walked too fast.

But then, why should it matter now? He wasn't looking for a woman tonight. Not when his appointment with the Social Adjustment counsellors was tomorrow morning, and he would get a Departure Permit. Should get one, he corrected himself. But he had never heard of a petition for a DP being refused.

He wanted to spend his last night in the city over here in the main park of C Sector, walking in the restless crowds, trying to settle his thoughts. He moved through slow aimless eddies of brightly appareled citizens, avoiding other pedestrians, skaters and the heavy, four-wheeled autoscooters. Everything was dully, uncompromisingly the same as in his own sector, even to the size and spacing of the huge, spreading trees. He had hoped, without conviction, that there might be some tiny, refreshing difference--anything but the mind-sapping sameness that had driven him to the petition.

Allen was careful not to brush against any girl with an escort. Since he wasn't on the make, what would be the use of fighting? Kind of an odd feeling, though, to know you'd never date or fight again, or ... Or what? What else was there to do, if you hadn't the luck to be a jobman or a tech? You ate, and slept, and preened, and exercised, and found what pleasure you could, and fought mostly because it was momentarily stimulating, and, eventually, after a hundred and fifty years or so, you died.

Unless you were a tech. If you were a tech, Government gave you stuff to keep you alive longer. A jobman got a somewhat different deal--he got nothing to keep him alive abnormally, because ninety percent of Earth's population was waiting for his job anyway.

Allen skirted a huge fountain throwing colored, scintillant spray high into the dark summer sky, stealing a glance backward over his shoulder. That girl was still behind him. Following him? It wouldn't be anything new, in his case--especially in his own sector--but maybe she just happened to be going his way.

It would be easy to find out. He circled the fountain twice. With her looks she should have been picked up before she'd left her compartment building block--except that whoever got her might have to fight more than once during the evening to hold her. Definitely a young man's darling.

And, the way it began to look, definitely Allen's darling. On the second trip around, she had backtracked to meet him face to face--her purpose obvious.

He tried to dodge, but there was no way it could be done without insult. Damn....

"Hi, brute. Nedda Marsh. Alone?" She ran soft hands along the hard biceps under his short jacket sleeves. The motion threw open her shriekingly bright orange cloak, displaying saucy breasts, creamy abdomen and, beneath her brief jeweled skirt, long smooth thighs. And the perfume assailed his nostrils with almost physical force.

"Hi, Nedda. Allen Kinderwood. Alone, natch." Natch, hell. But what could any male do to combat Government perfume? He smiled, his pulse suddenly quickening. "Date, darling?" She was a beautiful thing.

Her large, sparkling eyes showed pleasure. "Take me, Al." She touched vivid red lips lightly against his. And the formula was complete. Private citizens Allen Kinderwood and Nedda Marsh were dated at least until dawn--or a better man did them part.

He squeezed her arm where she'd snuggled it against his side, starting with her away from the fountain. "How come the most gorgeous thing in Kansas City wasn't dated earlier?"

She looked up at him, and the passion in her gaze made his heart skip like a teener's. "Could be I'm very particular, darling, but," her look was suddenly beseeching, "the truth is, I'm protected."

A slow, tiny fire of distaste fanned itself alive in Allen's brain. Why in the name of World Government did every other girl who made first play with him have to be protected? But there was his out. By unwritten social code he could declare the date off. Except that he had grown to increasingly hate the spiteful practice of 'protection'. It meant Nedda had peeved some local lothario who, along with other males in his clique, was going to damn well see
she wasn't intimate with anyone else until she begged another date with the original one. If you had a sadistic turn of
mind, it meant you could keep a delectable bit in freeze until her natural inclinations forced her into your arms. But
you'd have to fight any man who tried to date her in the meantime.

Fighting was legal, of course, as long as the loser was surgically repairable, and it was considered a normal
catharsis for strained relationships between males.

Not, Allen thought glumly, that he had any stake in the future of frantically weary society, but he had reached
the conclusion long ago that a man without the courage to back up his personal convictions wasn't worth the energy
it took to down him.

He stopped and held Nedda against him protectively. "I still want the date, sprite," he said. "I have to leave
early tomorrow, but I'll try to get you out of protection--okay?"

Her lips trembled. "Oh, yes. If you knew how it's been, these last few days--"

He shook her again, but more tenderly. "Deal. We'll try to reach your compartment." Living quarters were a
sanctuary no one but a medic could legally enter without invitation. He removed his stainless identification plaque
and slipped its chain about her throat. "If you see any of the guys who're watching for you, tell me but don't look at
them." He took her arm again and alertly began to work through the throng. "Describe your protector."

"Jeff Neal-Hayne. He's big, Al. Bigger than you. Heavier, but you've got muscles like he never saw. You look
faster, too."

Allen didn't know him, but the name was revealing. Not that anything but your Earth society number was
official, but use of a double surname meant your father had elected to stay with your mother for at least a while after
you were born. Most babies, of course, were immediately turned over to a Government creche, but it had always
seemed to Allen that kids raised by one or more parents had other advantages too, although he had never been able
to figure out just what they were. Maybe it was only his imagination.

* * * * *

At the edge of the park they chose the nearest double scooter which showed full battery charge.

Allen leaned against the forward rail. "Herd it, will you, Nedda? Every time I think of the hundreds of hours
I've spent plowing air with one of these gut-weighted things I want to break one. Hell, I can run faster. Anyway, you
know where we're going."

The girl smiled, pushed the power lever into forward range and steered into slow-moving traffic. "I saw a man
lift a single, once, but that's all he was able to do with it."

The lighted street seemed intensely bright after the dimmer reaches of the park. "Ever think of running one into
the river?"

She looked at him in amazement. "Fright, no. Why--you'd have to drive along a pedestrian path for at least a
block to reach the bank!" Nedda spun the steering wheel to avoid a long string of solemn teeners playing follow the
leader on singles. "You have funny thoughts, Al."

"I'm laughing." He flexed his muscles, impatient, as usual, with another citizen's sluggish mentation. "I suppose
the damn music never gets on your nerves, either?"

"Music? Oh--the music." She listened as though for the first time to the muted strains which played continuously throughout the city--calming, soothing, lulling. "Of course not. Why should it?"

"They've got it synchronized," said Allen. "Government's got it synchronized so you hear it just the same
volume no matter where you are outside. You have to listen to it."

"Darling, your boredom's showing."

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Don't let me spin you, lovely. I've got the answer."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I applied for a DP this morning."

"Al--no!"

"Why not?" He put it like the needle thrust of a fighting knife, daring her to find a reason, half hoping she
could.

"I--" She glanced at him once, quickly, then away. Then she drew a deep breath and let it sigh out. "How about
Mars, Al? There aren't many service machines, and they even let women do lots of little detailed things. I almost
got, once."

He was watching her shrewdly. "Why didn't you?" He had fought this one out with himself before.

"Oh--I don't know. Just never did."

"I'll tell you why you really didn't. It'd be too different. When the Government provides every convenience,
every comfort you can think of here, you can't stand having to work in a mine, with an oxygen helmet, stuffed into
heavy clothes. You can't stand the danger and the fear--and somehow, inside, you must know it. I'm pretty strong,
and I never met a man I was afraid of, but I know I couldn't stand Mars." He gripped the rail and stared out over the
wide, swarming street. "But Earth is a trap, Nedda. A big comfortable trap where you walk around endlessly without being any use at all."

She trod the brake and barely missed bumping a couple who had stopped to embrace. "I'm some use, hon. Wait'll we get home." Her eyes held a promise she could barely restrain.

Automatically, he caressed her with a practiced hand--and grabbed the wheel when she suddenly strained against him, trembling, pressing eager lips against his neck.

Christ, how long had she been protected? He felt a mounting anger against the social ennui which drove men's minds to such inhuman activity. Departure was the only escape from this kind of thing, and from the city--from any city.

But the Departees had always been only a tiny minority. Did that mean they--and he--were wrong? He brooded about it for seemingly the googolth time, guiding the scooter without conscious thought, turning as Nedda directed.

A trap, he'd told her. Well, he could see no reason to change that. The blazingly glorious sensotheaters, cafes, gymnasiums, dancing salons, amusement rides and hypnodream houses, crowding every main thoroughfare with their fantastically ornate architecture, were--when you thought about it--designed to trap people's minds, keep them from thinking of anything but a gossamer, useless pursuit of personal pleasure. And wasn't the design faulty when everyone was bored, when some chose Departure and others sank to the unnatural practice of protection to whet their sated appetites?

Nor was there any apparent hope for the future. Theatre productions, dream tapes, even the elaborate home teleview shows were all historical. Why? Was Government admitting there was nothing but staleness in the present? Why the concern with backtime?

Because of Government entertainment diet, Allen could probably, with a bit of practice, fish skillfully from an outrigger, make and use a longbow expertly, run a store profitably in the Money Ages, weave cloth correctly, build complete wooden houses--oh, any number of ancient things.

But he couldn't even talk the same language as the relative handful of trained men who built and operated the unbelievably intricate robomachinery which activated and maintained the complex cities of Earth.

Nedda's soft voice broke into his thoughts. "Al--Dan Halgersen's coming up behind us on a single. He's one of Jeff's--"

"Hold on." Allen swung the scooter hard right and adroitly darted across traffic toward an emblazoned theatre entrance. Here, now, was a situation he knew how to deal with. He said rapidly, out of the side of his mouth, "Jump off when I stop at the entry and kiss me like good-by. Register your plaque in the ID slot and head for the door--then look back. If I'm down, go on in and lose yourself. If he's down, come back."

He made a wrenching stop at the very edge of the crowd, swung Nedda through the opening between front and side rails and gave her a hard, sterile kiss.

She clung to him a moment. Without letting her eyes stray she said, "Slowing down right behind you. Luck, lover." Then she turned and started to pick her way across the walk.

Allen swung the scooter in a fast, tight circle to the left. Assuming his opponent to be right-handed, this would help avoid a knife slash from the rear if the other rammed his scooter--further assuming the man had not been tricked into thinking his presence was unnoticed.

He hadn't. When Allen whipped his head around to look at him, there was barely time to brake the heavier double to avoid a shrewdly planned collision. Halgersen, Nedda had said. He was thick-set, with heavy brows and large jaw. The type Allen had learned to associate with power and endurance but not too much speed.

Halgersen was holding a knife in his right hand. Allen quickly slipped his own blade from the sheath conveniently held at the front of his belt. They cut intricate patterns of feint, attack and withdraw, using passing vehicles as buffers. But not for long.

A voice from the crowd called, "Fight!" and space grew miraculously about the combatants, leaving a huge clearing in the street rimmed solidly with scooters and pedestrians. A few shouts of encouragement began to be heard as individuals selected one or the other of the men as a likely winner.

Allen dodged a sudden attempt at a side-swipe collision and the attendant vicious swipe of Halgersen's blade--and then drew first blood by a lightning riposte to the arm. Legal knife target was arm, leg, abdomen and a forehead cut without thrust--which would obscure vision with blood without doing organic damage.

The bright yellow luminescence of a police copter dropped and hovered as Allen tried to follow up his momentary advantage. The scene, he knew, would now be simultaneously filmed for possible legal record and broadcast on all teleview news programs. Entertainment for adults, education for the teenagers.

A feminine voice in the front ranks called, "Two stunts to one on green jacket!" and was immediately taken up by another girl near by.
He had little time to think with satisfaction that no female had ever been forced to pay off a bet of some ingeniously embarrassing public behavior on his account. Halgersen was now trying to maneuver him for a straight ram which would bring them definitely together. He wasn't being weakened by the slow drip of blood from his arm and he didn't seem to be bothered by pain.

And then they were close to the circle rim. Allen swung his scooter so the cooling downdraft from the copter--coming from above the center of the cleared area--was directly against his back, a method he had devised for knowing his position without having to take his eyes from a close opponent. He let his shoulders droop suddenly, as though he was tired, and at the murmur of disappointment from many onlookers he began to back slowly away from Halgersen.

The blue-jacketed figure rolled into the trap scowling. He tried again for a head-on ram. Allen let him come, and at the last possible instant, when Halgersen would be unable to reverse, stop, or even swerve, he flipped the bar to full power ahead. And braced himself accordingly.

The scooters met with a bone-jarring thud of perimeter rubber. Halgersen was hurled neatly over his own guard rail to land gaspingly across Allen's.

Allen grasped the back of the other's belt in a grip that had dismayed many a combatant, hauled him into position and hamstrung both legs with two dextrous thrust-and-cut movements. It took but a moment longer to leap above a desperate slash at his own legs, drag the heavier man to the thick floor of the scooter and render him unconscious with a stamping kick of one sandaled heel. It left an easy repair job for the medics, but would keep one Dan Halgersen from fighting again for more than a week--and maybe make him think twice about joining in another protection pact.

Allen leaped up and balanced on two guard rails while the police copter settled down to pick up Halgersen. He signaled Nedda to move on along the walkway.

While the onlookers were clapping approval of the show, he removed Halgersen's plaque, leaped down and dodged an attempted kiss from the girl who had given odds on him--glancing back warily in case her escort felt insulted--then pushed through the mob to join Nedda.

She hugged his arm ecstatically. "Darling, every woman should have a guy like you."

"Yeah." He felt no sense of triumph. It had happened too many times before. Everything had happened too many times before--repetitive, palling and purposeless. He tucked the won plaque into her decorative belt. It was Nedda's proof that protection was ended, and Halgersen would have to call for it accompanied by a witness.

"Where the hell is your place?" he asked. For a moment he wondered why he didn't just turn abruptly and leave her, social mores notwithstanding. Then Nedda's perfume began its chemical magic again, and he carefully straightened his jacket and set his forelock in its proper place.

"Nedda," he accused lazily, "you're a nymph. Ever tried psychoconditioning?"

She gave him a tender, lingering kiss and burrowed more comfortably in his arms. "Not yet, darling. Would you prefer me less--responsive?"

Allen patted her as carefully as possible to show approval without arousing her again. "No man would. But it must be rough between dates, isn't it?" And just why should he be worrying about anyone else at this stage of the game? Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was just curious now that it no longer mattered.

She avoided his eyes in the cool semigloom of the compartment. "I--usually manage to have enough dates. Until some moron like Neal-Hayne puts me under protection."

He disengaged himself gently, rolled off the pliant couch and increased the room's light with the wall knob.

"You should register a complaint, Nedda. After three he'll be forcibly psyched, you know." He dialed the servoconsole and focused a morning meal menu on the viewscreen. "Ready for breakfast, Pip?"

"Mmm--if you are." Nedda came over and lifted the phone from its panel recess. "That number six algal protein is supposed to be a new taste sensation. Like?"

He shrugged. "Let's try it. It'll be my last go at this robot feed."

When the meals had been deposited in the service chute she looked at him pleadingly. "Hon, why don't you try being psyched? They could make you satisfied with--things as they are."

Allen lifted a thin transparent food cover while he shook his head. "Maybe they could, Nedda. But it would have to be almost total erasure to change my slant on everything, and being forced to accept what I hate is worse than anything else I can think of. It wouldn't be me when they got through. Whatever causes me to think like I do is the me, and that'd be gone."

Some of the resentful animosity surged up in him and he had to talk about it. "Look at your compartment. The same as every other single in the city--or any city. The walls are the shade of green that's best for the eyes. Furniture and fixtures are always the same colors. Every compartment has a servoconsole to condition the air, control the
temperature and humidity, bring you food or any other standard service, provide teleview shows, music or requests. You could live your life inside this square hole. Everybody has everything and nothing means anything--can't you see that?"

She came around the table and sat on his lap with her head against his neck. "No, presh, but if you'll change your mind about a DP you can date me any time, always. I'd like to share a double with you forever."

He traced soothing circles on her smooth back with his fingertips. "That's the closest I've ever come to owning anything," he mused.

"But, hon, Government owns everything and takes care of everything. When you can always use a thing, how could it be better if you owned it?"

Allen held her against him tightly, fighting the old fight to find words. How could you explain how you felt things to be right or wrong, without really knowing the reasons?

"Maybe," he said slowly, "it's as though I wanted to keep you for myself alone. But Nedda, if another man made the right approach, could you refuse him?" After a minute he repeated, "Could you?"

Eventually, she made two answers.

They were warm and wet and dropped onto his chest.

* * * * *

The Adjustment Building was a soaring, chastely white structure of silicoid plastic, dazzling in the hot morning sun. It crossed Allen's mind fleetingly that everything built nowadays would long outlast the builders. That seemed right, but he didn't know why.

He took his ID plaque from Nedda and kissed her. He had tried to dissuade her from coming with him, but she had merely smiled and held his arm and urged him toward a double scooter.

"This is it, beautiful," he said shortly, at the entrance. And, with an attempt at levity, "Don't take any more protection." Actually, what could you say? He went inside quickly, without looking back.

At the door marked Kansas City Department of Social Adjustment, he slipped his plaque into the correct slot for a moment and was admitted directly to the waiting room for those who had appointments for the day.

There was only one other waiting—a handsome blond youth whose knife was new. Allen sat down in a lounge chair across the room.

And Nedda came in and sat down beside him.

He could have understood almost anything but that. "How in the name of fear--"

"Do you think," she said mischievously, taking his hand, "the B Sector champ is the only one who can get an appointment?"

Before it could more than flash through Allen's mind that he'd not told her that, the blond youth was standing before them, his eyes hotly on Nedda. Then, obviously confused that she was already holding hands, he addressed himself to Allen as though it was what he had intended doing.

"Marty Bowen, sir. Uh--I'm going to see if they'll let me have a double compartment with some gym apparatus in it." He shifted his weight to the other foot and hung a thumb nervously in his belt, unable to keep from darting glances at Nedda.

Allen noted, with rising anger and some other unpleasant emotion he couldn't define, that she hadn't dropped her eyes. He said curtly. "Fine, kid--hope you make it." The youth mumbled something else and went back to his chair.

He had barely seated himself when a voder speaker crooned a number melodiously. With a quick backward glance at Nedda, the blond lad went on into the counsel room.

Allen's mind remained in confusion, shot through with anger at himself that he should waste thoughts now on anything but the coming interview. The room was beginning to fill quietly with others.

His number was called a few minutes later.

And Nedda's was called along with it.

The brilliant room was two stories high, with fluted walls and no windows. Obviously the size was to impress interviewees. But why should they have to be impressed? Wasn't the wisdom of the five tech doctors sufficient by itself? Wasn't it?

He sat in a chair indicated by the dark-skinned one, and listened while the very old one in the center talked to Nedda.

Had dating the B Sector park champion solved her difficulty with the man she had reported? Fine. It was the second such report about him in a year—the other also coming from a girl who was highly sexed. Did Nedda not consider herself to have a problem which required psychoconditioning? No? Well, perhaps in later years, when her
beauty and her mind were somewhat changed.... No, there would seem to be no justification for giving her a compartment in another sector, unless she had persuaded the champion or another to share a double with her. Would that be all? Much happiness to her.

Abruptly, Allen realized Nedda had left and that the frail old man was talking to him.

"... unusual to have joint interviews without a more definite emotional tie, but we felt you would like to know how you had rendered civic aid."

So pitting him without choice against any of several men was their idea of civic aid. No wonder he'd met so many protected girls in the past. This time, they'd harnessed Nedda's restless passion to the task of dissuading him from a DP. Very neat.

It made him feel better to know they'd failed where he was concerned, and his resentment abated somewhat. He said, "Glad I could help," careful to keep his voice emotionless. Then, determined to have no further subtleties, "If I can have my departure permit, I won't trouble you further."

Maybe his approach wasn't right, but all they could do would be to refuse him. In which case there were other ways--and the hell with legality.

"We hope," smiled the old doctor benignly, "there may be another way. Perhaps, if we discuss your problem, we can find a solution which won't cost the city a handsome young citizen."

Allen made it a direct attack. "Why should the city miss any citizen? In fact, what good is the city itself--what good is any city?"

And almost, the techs seemed startled. But a younger one said easily, "A city, Mr. Kinderwood, permits a maximum of efficient service and pleasure, with a minimum of waste and discomfort."

Allen leaned back and stubbornly folded his arms. "I've had enough of pleasures and comforts without meaning, and I've nothing to do, and it doesn't look like anyone's making any progress anywhere. Even on the planets they're just repeating backtime stuff with modern equipment."

The old man waved a hand at the others and looked at Allen intently. His voice was softly insistent. "The one continuous thread in human history has been the seeking of more pleasure and greater comfort for all members of the race. Our technology gives us a maximum of both. No one labors, and the few who work prefer to do so. No one is diseased, no one stays in pain longer than the time necessary to reach a medic. Everyone can have everything he needs, without striving and without debt. And as technology advances, there will be even greater benefits for all. What more can be done to make the citizens of Earth happy?"

For the first time, Allen felt confused. "I don't know," he said slowly. "The way you put it, it sounds right. But where does it all lead? What reason have I got for living? What reason does the human race have for surviving?"

The sociologist looked even older. "In all seriousness, sir, can you answer the questions you have just asked?"

His eyes were expectant--but there didn't seem to be much hope reflected in their depths.

Allen noted a tenseness around the table. Why were they asking him for answers they were supposed to know? Or was it another of their subtleties?

"No," he said curtly, "I don't know the answer to any of them. Has it got a bearing on my getting a DP?"

The central figure sighed. "None at all." He pressed several tiny buttons on the polished table and an inscribed card rose halfway out of a slot. "We merely hope that some day a man will come along who can tell us--before someone who may not be a man comes along and makes the answers futile." He handed Allen the card. "Here is your permit. You may take it to the third office south on the corridor through that door. We don't feel it is the answer to your problem, but we admit we don't--"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Allen. He wet his lips. "Did you say 'someone who may not be a man'?"

"Yes. It is an aspect you have not considered, Mr. Kinderwood." The sociologist's face seemed haggard. "Even a few generations ago, Earth as it is today would have seemed like a concept of heaven. We know now it is not enough, but we don't know why. Perhaps, if we can reach the stars the problem will cease to be critical. By the same token, life from the stars may come here first."

"We have no remotest idea what such an eventuality would entail. It may provide a solution. It may quite conceivably send man back to the forests and jungles."

"You have experienced our only answer to the latter possibility. While providing man with everything to which he has aspired for milleniums, we instill in him, through the media of entertainment, knowledge of all the survival practices known to the backtimers who painfully nurtured civilization from an embryonic idea to its present pinnacle. We can do no more."

Allen flexed his arms involuntarily at the sheer enormity of the idea. It was one thing to let a useless race expire, quite another to think of its being forced back to-- "But--can't anyone think of anything else to do?"

"Whoever is capable of devising anything else," the old doctor said resignedly, "will undoubtedly be able to carry it out with or without our assistance." He pressed more buttons and there was a muted sound of the voder
calling a number. "The exit over there, Mr. Kinderwood. And--much happiness."

Allen's thoughts swirled in tumultuous confusion. Dimly, he realized that man had outstripped himself, and saw with intense bitterness that there was no answer on Earth for any ordinary citizen. Or was there? And if there was, was it worth trying to find? He flung open the door to the corridor violently, as though the force could quiet his mind. Maybe, if he didn't use the permit, he could stay and figure out an answer. Nedda would be sympathetic and patient while-- And then he stopped. Across the wide hallway, Nedda stood beneath a window, looking at him. And the blond youth held her with flushed understanding, impatiently waiting, caressing her arm with his hand, binding her to him with the one bond she could not break.

She watched Allen start slowly down the corridor. Once, when he stumbled, she gave a stifled sob, and tears brimmed and spilled silently when he passed through the door marked Kansas City Department of Euthanasia.

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Contents

PIRATES OF THE GORM
By Nat Schachner

The trail of vanished space ships leads Grant Pemberton to a marvellous lake of fire.

Grant Pemberton sat up suddenly in his berth, every sense straining and alert. What was it that had awakened him in the deathly stillness of the space-flier? His right hand slid under the pillow and clutched the handle of his gun. Its firm coolness was a comforting reality.

There it was again. A tiny scratching on the door as though someone was fumbling for the slide-switch. Very quietly he sat, waiting, his finger poised against the trigger. Suddenly the scratching ceased, and the panel moved slowly open. A thin oblong patch glimmered in the light of the corridor beyond. Grant tensed grimly.

A hand moved slowly around the slit--a hand that held a pencil-ray. Even in the dim illumination, Grant noted the queer spatulate fingers. A Ganymedan! In the entire solar system only they had those strange appendages.

Pemberton catapulted out of his berth like a flash. Not a moment too soon, either. A pale blue beam slithered across the blackness, impinged upon the pillow where his head had lain only a moment before. The air-cushion disintegrated into smoldering dust. Grant's weapon spat viciously. A hail of tiny bullets rattled against the panel, and exploded, each in a puffball of flame.

But it was too late. Already the unknown enemy was running swiftly down the corridor, the sucking patter of his feet giving more evidence of his Ganymedan origin. Pemberton sprang to the door, thrust it open just in time to see a dark shape disappearing around a bend in the corridor. There was no use of pursuit; the passageway ended in a spray of smaller corridors, from which ambush would be absurdly easy.

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HE glanced swiftly around. The corridor was empty, silent in the dim, diffused light. The motley passengers were all sound asleep; no one had been disturbed by the fracas. Earthmen, green-faced Martians, fish-scaled Venusians, spatulate Ganymedans and homeward-bound Callistans, all reposing through the sleep-period in anticipation of an early landing in Callisto.

All were asleep, that is, but one. That brought Pemberton back to the problem of his mysterious assailant. Why had this Ganymedan tried to whiff him out of existence? Grant frowned. No one on board knew of his mission, not even the captain. On the passenger list he was merely Dirk Halliday, an inconspicuous commercial traveler for Interspace Products. Yet someone had manifestly penetrated his disguise and was eager to remove him from the path of whatever deviltry was up. Who?

Grant gave a little start, then swore softly. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before! The scene came back to him, complete in every detail, as though he were once more back on Earth, in the small, simply furnished office of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

The Chief of the Service was glancing up at him keenly. Beside him was a tall, powerfully shouldered Ganymedan, Miro, Inspector for Ganymede. Grant looked at him with a faint distaste as he sat there, drumming on the arm of his chair with his spatulate fingers, his soft-suction padded hoofs curled queerly under the seat. There was something furtive, too, about the red lidless eyes that shifted with quick unwinking movements.

* * * * *

But then, Pemberton had small use for the entire tribe of Ganymedans. Damned pirates, that's all they were. It
was not many years back since they had been the scourge of the solar system, harrying spatial commerce with their swift piratical fliers, burning and slaying for the mere lust of it.

That is, until an armada of Earth space-fliers had broken their power in one great battle. The stricken corsairs were compelled to disgorge their accumulations of plunder, give up all their fliers and armament, and above all, the import of metals was forbidden them. For, strangely enough, none of the metallic elements was to be found on Ganymede. All their weapons, all their ships, were forged of metals from the other planets.

It was now five years since Ganymede had been admitted once again to the Planetary League, after suitable declarations of repentance. But the prohibitions still held. And Grant placed small faith in the sincerity of the repentance.

The Chief was speaking.

"We've called you in--Miro and I," he said, in his usual swift, staccato manner, "because we've agreed that you are the best man in the Service to handle the mission we have in mind."

Grant said nothing.

"It's a particularly dangerous affair," the Chief continued. "Five great space-fliers, traveling along regular traffic routes, have all vanished within the space of a month--passengers, crews and all. Not a trace of them can be found."

"No radio reports, sir?"

"That's the most curious part of the whole business. Everyone of the fliers was equipped with apparatus that could have raised the entire solar system with a call for help, and yet not the tiniest whisper was heard."

The Chief got up and paced the floor agitatedly. It was plain that this business was worrying him. Miro continued to sit calmly, seemingly indifferent. "It's uncanny, I tell you. Gone as though empty space had swallowed them up."

"You've applied routine methods, of course," Grant ventured.

"Of course," the Chief waved it aside impatiently. "But we can't discover a thing. Battle fliers have patrolled the area without success. The last ship was literally snatched away right under the nose of a convoy. One minute it was in radio communication, and the next--whiff--it was gone."

"Where is this area you mention?" Already Pemberton's razor-edged brain was at work on the problem.

"Within a radius of five million miles from Jupiter. We've naturally considered placing an embargo upon that territory, but that would mean cutting off all of the satellites from the rest of the system."

Miro stirred. His smooth slurred voice rolled out.

"And my planet would suffer, my friend. Alas, it has already suffered too much." He evoked a sigh from somewhere in the depths of his barrel chest, and tried to cast up his small red eyes.

Grant suffered too, a faint disgust. Damn his eyes, what business had an erstwhile pirate, not too recently reformed, being self-righteous?

"Miro thinks," the Chief continued unheeding, "that the Callistans know more about this than they admit. He has a theory that Callisto is somehow gathering up these ships to use in a surprise attack against his own planet, Ganymede. He says Callisto has always hated them."

"Damn good reason," Grant said laconically.

Miro's lidless eyes flamed into sudden life. "And what do you mean by that, my friend?"

Pemberton replied calmly. "Simply that your people have harried and ravaged them for untold centuries. They were your nearest prey, you know."

Miro sprang to his feet, his soft suction pads gripping the floor as though preparatory to a spring. Gone was the sanctimonious unction of his former behavior; the ruthless savage glared out of the red eyes, the flattened fingers were twisting and curling.

"You beastly Earthling," he cried in a voice choked with rage, "I'll--"

The Chief intervened swiftly. "Here, none of that," he said sharply to Miro. "Don't say anything you'll regret later." Then he turned to Grant, who was steadily holding his ground: "There was no reason, Pemberton, to insult an inspector of the Service. Consider yourself reprimanded." But the edge of the rebuke was taken off by the slight twinkle in the Chief's eye.

Somehow a truce was patched up. Grant was to ship as an ordinary passenger on the Althea, the great passenger liner that plied between Callisto and the Earth. It was not his duty to prevent the disappearance of the vessel, the Chief insisted, but to endeavor to discover the cause. It was up to Grant then to escape, if he could, and to report to Miro on Ganymede immediately with his findings. Miro was leaving by his private Service flier at once for Ganymede, to await him. Grant thought he saw a faint sardonic gleam in the Inspector's eyes at that, but paid no particular heed to it at the time.
Now, as Grant stood in the corridor of the great space-flier, listening intently for further sounds from his hidden foe, it flashed on him. Miro knew he was on board. It was a Ganymedan who had treacherously attacked him. The puzzle was slowly fitting its pieces together. But the major piece still eluded him. What would happen to the ship?

As he turned to go back to his room, a ripping, tearing, grinding sound came to his startled ears. It was followed by a sudden swishing noise. Grant knew what that meant. A meteor had ripped into the vitals of the space-flier, and the precious air was rushing through the fissure into outer space. He whirled without an instant's hesitation and sprang down the long corridor toward the captain's quarters. If caught in time, the hole could be plugged.

Even as he ran, there was another grinding smash, then another, and another. Good Lord, they must have headed right into a meteor shower. Panels were sliding open, and people, scantily attired, thrust startled heads out into the corridor. Someone called after him, but he did not heed or stop his headlong race. He must get to the control room at once.

Already the air in the corridor was a sucking whirlpool that beat and eddied about him in its mad rush to escape. It sounded like the drumbeat of unsilenced exploders. A meteor shower of unprecedented proportions! In the back of Grant's mind as he ran, hammered a thought. Every swarm of meteors in the solar system was carefully plotted. The lanes of travel were routed to avoid them. There was no known shower in this particular area!

He collided violently with a strange ungainly figure. In his desperate haste he did not give much heed, but tried to push his way past. The figure turned on him, and then Grant stopped short, an exclamation frozen to his lips. Red unwinking eyes stared out at him from goggles set in a helmet. The body was completely inclosed in lusterless creatoid. It was a Ganymedan in a space-suit!

Grant saw the quick movement of the other toward an open side flap. He did not hesitate an instant. His fist shot out and caught the Ganymedan flush in the throat, while his left hand simultaneously seized the creatoid-covered arm that gripped a pencil-ray. The helmeted head went back with a sickening thud. But the Ganymedan was a powerful brute. Even as he staggered back from the force of the blow, vainly trying to release the pencil-ray for action, his right foot jerked forward. The next moment both were rolling on the floor, twisting and heaving in silent combat. Frightened passengers rushed down the corridor, screaming with terror, half carried along by the hurricane wind, clambering over the combatants in an insane desire to get away, where, they knew not; and still neither relaxed his grip, seeking a mortal hold.

Pemberton was certain that his silent unknown foe held the clue to the mystery he was trying to fathom. He fought on, silently, grimly. The cold creatoid fabric was slippery, but a sudden jerk of an arm, a certain quick twist that Grant was familiar with, and his enemy went limp. Grant's breath was coming in quick, labored gasps. There was very little air left now. But he did not care. He tugged at the fastenings on the helmet. He must see who his captive was, wrest from him the heart of the mystery.

There came a clatter of feet behind him, a sudden rush of space-suited figures that overwhelmed and passed over him with trampling strides. He was torn loose from his prey, rolled over and over, gasping for air. When he staggered to his feet again, bruised and shaken, the corridor was swept clean of figures. His assailants had carried his opponent away with them.

A wild surge of anger swept through him. More Ganymedans, these rescuers, all accoutered for airless space. They had been carefully prepared for this. Heedless of all else, he swayed groggily after them, intent only on joining battle once again. The illumination was dim now, the cries of fear that had rung through the ship were gone; only a deathly silence reigned now. His lungs were burning for want of air; even the swirlwind had died down for lack of fuel. But still he kept on, like a bloodhound on the trail.

He rounded a corner. A slight figure, swaying like a reed, collided with him and would have fallen if he had not thrust out a supporting arm. It was a girl. Even in the shadowy light he saw that she was beautiful. Her delicately molded features were drained white, but her deep pooled eyes were level in their gaze, unafraid.

"I'm sorry," he managed, finding utterance labored, "Are you hurt?"

"Quite all right," she said, with a wan smile, "if only I had some air to breathe."

The essential bravery of her touched him. He forgot all about the escaped Ganymedans.

"We'll have to try some other portion of the ship. Maybe some of the bulkheads are uninjured."

She shook her head. "I just saw the captain," she enunciated faintly. "Every bulkhead is riddled. Said—I should get space-suit—in stateroom—though no use—doomed. Something wrong—wireless—not working...." Her voice trailed. She had fainted.

Grant caught up her slight form and lurched unsteadily into the nearest cabin. The blood was roaring in his ears now, his heart was pumping madly, but he forced himself on. His eyes strained toward the compartment where the
emergency space-suit was neatly compacted. Thank God. It was still there. The inmate had evidently rushed out at the first alarm to join the terror-maddened crush.

Pemberton worked with feverish haste. Somehow he thrust the unconscious girl into the suit, tightened the helmet into position, opened the valve that started the steady measured flow of life-giving oxygen. Then, with dark spots dancing before his eyes, he deposited her gently on the floor, and managed to force himself in the now almost total darkness toward another room.

* * * * *

His swelling hands fumbled. The compartment was empty. Despairing, conscious only of a desire to lie down, to rest, he tried another. It, too, was empty. He stumbled over sprawled bodies, fell, managed to get up again. Again he fumbled into a compartment. The clammy feel of the creatoid never was more welcome. His breath was coming in whistling gasps. It seemed ages of strangulation before the first cool rush of oxygen expanded his tortured lungs. For a full minute he stood there, inhaling deep draughts. Then once more he was himself, his brain functioning with keen clarity.

He must find the Ganymedans and come to grips with them. There was no doubt in his mind that somehow they had been responsible for the cataclysm. Just how, he did not know, but he would find out.

But the girl. He could not leave her. Duty and something else stirred into conflict. He hesitated. In the flap of the suit was an emergency flash. Throwing the beam on the walls and flooring, he managed to retrace his steps to the cabin where he had left her. As he flashed it inside, his heart gave a great bound. She was standing now.

"Feel all right?" he spoke into the tiny transmitter that was part of the regulation equipment.

"Fine." Her warm, rich voice spoke in his ear. "But I'm not thinking of myself. Are the others on board safe? What happened?"

"I'm afraid we are the only ones alive," he told her gravely. "As to what happened, I can only guess. We seem to have hit an unusually heavy meteor shower that riddled us through and through, though--" He paused.

"Though what?"

He ignored her question. "The first thing we've got to do is find out where we are." His flash sought the window switch and found it. He went over and pressed it. A section of the beryllium-steel casing slid smoothly open, disclosing a thick flawless quartzite port. He stared out at the dark pattern of space. Long he gazed, then a stifled exclamation reached the girl.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Come and look," he told her gravely, and made room for her.

* * * * *

At first she saw only the unwinking stars of space. Then her eyes shifted forward. Jupiter lay ahead, a vast cloud-girt disk. It was ominously near. Somehow it gave the effect of rushing straight at her.

Right along the equator floated, or seemed to float, a huge red oval--the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. She had heard of it before. But what caught her immediate attention was a tiny flare of intense illumination, right in the very heart of the Spot. Bright orange it was, tinged with yellow, dazzling even at this distance. She watched it eagerly. Then she gave a sudden start.

"You've seen it." Grant's voice sounded quietly in her helmet.

"Yes. Why, it--it pulsates!"

"Exactly. Now look along the hull of the ship."

She did so, and gasped again. The steel-shod sides were bathed in an unearthly orange glow.

"Why, that must be the light from the orange spot down there."

Grant nodded. "Yes, and more than that. They are power waves of a nature that we've known nothing of before. We are being pulled down along that beam straight for Jupiter, straight for the source of that light!"

"But that means there are intelligent beings on Jupiter."

"No doubt."

"But--but everyone know that there's no life on Jupiter. It's a frozen waste swathed in impenetrable whirlwind clouds."

"How does everyone know?" Grant retorted. "Has anyone ever penetrated through those clouds?"

"No," she admitted; "though there have been plenty of expeditions that tried, and never came back."

"That of course doesn't prove anything. Mind you," he added. "I didn't say there was native life existing on Jupiter. I merely said there were intelligent beings operating that illumination."

"Who could it be then?"

"We'll find out when we get down there."

* * * * *

The very calmness of his matter-of-fact statement brought her back abruptly to their precarious situation.
"But, great heavens, we'll smash and be killed. Can't we do something?"

"We'll not smash." Grant said positively. "Though very likely we shall be killed. As for doing something, we can only wait and take our chances, if the gentry who are hauling us in will only give us an opportunity. You know," he added with a fine inconsecutiveness, "I don't even know your name."

She bubbled with sudden laughter. "Nona--Nona Gail. I was on my way to Callisto, to meet my father," she explained. "He's an engineer, doing some construction work for Interspace Products. But now that I've told you all, what and who may you be?"

He was frank. There was now no need for concealment. "Grant Pemberton, an unimportant unit of the Interplanetary Secret Service."

"Then you knew that the trip would be dangerous," she challenged.

"Yes."

"Why did you come?"

"It is part of my duties."

There was silence between them. He turned to stare out of the quartz port-hole again. Jupiter was perceptibly nearer; an enormous, convex globe that blotted out half the heavens. They were being drawn at a frightful velocity toward the mysterious pulsating point, now blinding in its brilliance.

They both saw it simultaneously: a space-suited figure, far out in the depths of interstellar space, caught up in a sudden flare of orange illumination. The strange figure seemed to whirl around, straighten up, and shoot at breakneck speed headlong for Jupiter. Behind it, and in a direct line with the winking flame in the Great Spot, another space denizen glowed luridly, startlingly, out of the blackness beyond, whirled, and shot down the long invisible path.

Nona cried out: "Grant, tell me quickly, what are they; what is pulling them?"

Even as she spoke, more and more figures were blazoned in that orange ray, until a long file of beings were catapulting in a single straight line past the space-ship, outdistancing it until they became faint specks in the distance.

* * * * *

Pemberton's hand was upon her shoulder, his eyes literally blazing through the goggles, while his voice shouted in her ears. "Come with me: We haven't a second to lose."

"But," she gasped, "you haven't told me--"

"No time," he interrupted, and, shoving her in front of him, he rushed her through corridor after corridor until they came to the air-lock of the liner.

"If only we have time," he groaned, and cursed himself for a bungling fool for not having surmised the maneuver earlier.

Just as he had expected, the great lock was open. The ship was as silent as the grave. There was no air anywhere, only the unutterably cold airlessness of space. Without pausing in his headlong rush, he pushed the bewildered girl through the open port, out into the overwhelming, intangible blackness. Nona's smothered cry of fear came to him as the next instant he stepped forward and left the solid footing to float in sudden weightlessness in a vast sea of nothingness.

The girl reached out and caught his arm convulsively. Even through the fabric of their suits he could feel her trembling. Pemberton had taken good care to retain a hold on the edge of the open air-lock. The two swung unsteadily.

"What is the reason for this?" Grant sensed, rather, than heard, the tremor in her voice. She was making a desperate effort to control herself. "We'll be lost--out here in space."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'll explain in due course. In the meantime you'll have to trust me. Did you see where that invisible ray held when it illumined the last Ganymedan?"

"Ganymedan?" she echoed in surprise. "What makes you think--"

"Never mind that. Did you?" he insisted.

"Yes," she admitted, "it was about over there." She indicated the spot with an outthrust arm. "About a hundred yards, I should judge."

"Exactly," he agreed. "Well, young lady, our lives, and far more, depend upon our reaching that exact line in space immediately."

"I don't know what you are talking about, but even so, how can we make it? I'm not a rocket."

"It's difficult, I admit, but we must. Now hold on tight to my arm, and press your feet firmly against the wall of the ship." She obeyed.

"Now when I count three, shove off violently, and pray that we're going straight. Are you game?"

She stiffened; then, very slowly, "All right; start counting."
"Good girl," Grant said approvingly. "One--two--th-r-ee-ee!"
They flexed their legs in perfect unison. And shoved off.

Out into the blackness of space they shot, lost to all sense of motion: yet the hull of the space-flier, dimly gleaming in the thin light of the far off sun, retreated from them with terrifying swiftness.

They were alone in space! It was an uncanny, a horribly helpless sensation. All about them was infinity, a vast void out of which peered at them the cold, unwinking stars. They were like swimmers in mid-ocean, without even the buoyant feel of the salt water to comfort them.

Nona's grip on Grant's arm was agonizing in its intensity.
"Scared?" Grant queried.
"A--a little," she admitted; "but don't bother about me. I'm all right."
She could be depended upon to keep up her end, Grant thought admiringly.

On and on they floated in the welter of space. And still there was no ray, nothing but unrelieved blackness. Pemberton was somewhat worried. Had the saving ray been quenched at the source? Were they too late? If so, they were doomed to a frightful obliterating fall to the surface of the planet, or worse still, they were destined to swing endlessly in space. Already the liner was far away, out of their grasp, even had they desired to return.

His breath was coming in quick gasps now. "Scared?" he once more asked the silent figure beside him.
"Frightfully--but carry on. We'll get there, wherever it is."
Her gay determination strengthened him wonderfully. On and on they floated.

Suddenly the dim, dark bulk of the girl caught the uncanny orange light. The next instant the creatoid fabric of his own suit caught it, too.
"Thank God," he cried joyously. "It's still on. Just relax, Nona, the ray will take care of us now."
He felt a powerful tug at his body, he was whirled completely around, and then there was a steady pull. He was being catapulted down the ray to the mysterious point of brilliance in the Great Red Spot. The girl was right beside him. The space-liner was passed with a smooth rush, and soon receded to a dwindling speck.

"Now will you explain?" asked Nona impatiently, after she had caught her breath in sudden relief.

Grant stretched luxuriously before he began.
"Certainly. There's nothing for us now to do but wait until we get pulled down to Jupiter, and that'll take some time. I hope we look like Ganymedans."
"Will you get on with your story!" she cried.

He obeyed. He started from the beginning and went right up to the time when he had so rudely thrust her out into space.

"You see," he explained. "I had put the puzzle together a bit, but there were still pieces missing. For instance, those chaps down there know that every space-liner is equipped with emergency space-suits. Why pull the ship down with live men on board? That would naturally mean a fight, and we have no mean weapons, what with disintegrator ray-projectors and explosive electro-bullets." Then, again, for some reason, there were Ganymedans on board. They would very likely be whiffed out in the mêlée. The ship might be destroyed also, and they evidently are very careful about getting the ship down intact. The little meteor holes can easily be plugged up, and the liner made as good as new. At least that was my guess.

"I was trying to puzzle it out, rather hopelessly," he continued, "when I saw the ray out in space pick up those floating figures. That was the last little piece in the jigsaw.

"The Ganymedans evidently had to leave the ship because, as it approaches the planet, something will be done to kill off any unfortunate who are still alive, waiting their chance to fight the invisible enemy. Possibly a penetrating lethal gas that will be forced into the interior. So they evolved the ray to carry the Ganymedan passengers down gently, safely. And we are stowaways," he concluded grimly.

Nona had listened intently to the long recital.
"But why," she expostulated, "was it necessary to have their own people on board? The meteors that riddled the ship were projectiles shot from their station on Jupiter. So was the attraction-ray that pulls the ship down."

"Because they required a sufficient force to disable the radio apparatus. All radio waves used on interplanetary liners are shielded from interference. It is impossible to blank them out. And with the radio intact, every battle flier in space would be on their trail in a hurry."

Several hours passed, and still they fell endlessly through space, unaware of their motion except that Jupiter was now a huge orb blotting out the universe. The grim face of the giant planet was enswathed in endless billowing clouds. No one had ever penetrated to the real core. But what held their eager, straining attention was a vast blood
red disk, cyclonic in character, directly beneath them. The Great Red Spot! And immediately in the center of it was
the tiny, blindingly brilliant yellow orange oval, winking up at them with quick, steady pulsations.

"What can it be?" Nona wondered.

"The source of their power, evidently. But what interests me more just now is where the Ganymedans have
their hangout in those clouds, and what they're doing with the ships they capture."

Jupiter was now a flat level stretch that reached on all sides as far as the eye could see. Grant felt a sudden
sensation of weight again, as though something was pressing with crushing force against his chest.

"Hello," he said, "our fall is being checked. They're making sure their friends come to no harm." And he
laughed bitterly, thinking of the men and women lying with lungs ruptured, cold and stiff, in the interior of the
Althea; of the possible few wretches who had managed to huddle into space-suits, ignorant of the deadly gas
that was soon to search out their seemingly impenetrable habiliments.

Slowly, ever more slowly, they fell. Thin wisps of reddish vapor rushed upward toward them, and then they
were enveloped in vast swirls of cloud masses. They were within the Great Spot!

Then the lurid clouds parted suddenly, revealing a deep hole, at the bottom of which flamed and flared the
mysterious yellow-orange brilliance. Down the long shaft they fell, while all around its invisible walls dark red
cyclones stirred and beat in vain.

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Just as it seemed as if they were doomed to fall headlong into the blaze, they were swerved violently into an
opening that angled off from the main shaft. Down this branching shaft they continued to fall--interminably--when
suddenly it widened, and they were dropping through the interior of a great dome of which the arched roof was the
swirling clouds they had just penetrated. Directly beneath floated a flat island of smooth rock, supported and upheld
by a shining sea of vapors.

The girl exclaimed sharply, but Grant only nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. He had expected
something like this. For, clustered in serried rows at the end of the island directly beneath them were sleek, stream-
lined grayhounds of the interplanetary traffic lanes, now resting immovably on the smooth gray stone--the missing
space-liners!

The island was bisected by a huge forbidding wall, over which, at their angle, Grant was unable to see.

The ground was encumbered too with clumps of intricate machinery, all of the same polished gray stone;
Ganymedan stone, Ganymedan machinery, Pemberton recognized at once. Hundreds of figures were scurrying
awkwardly around, clad in the inevitable space-suit. Several were working desperately at a huge concave glass
reflector. Others were pointing a stone nozzle, extending out of a pit, directly upward.

"I'm afraid." Nona shuddered and pressed closer to Grant.

"Don't be," he assured her. "Just say nothing when we land. Let me do the talking."

All this while they had been floating gently downward toward what they now saw to be a miniature replica of
the vaster orange brightness at the bottom of the main shaft from which they had been diverted. It was a pool of
liquid fire, so intense in its brilliance that their eyes were dazzled staring at it. It rose and fell in regular pulsations.
They were not far above it now, and still no one on the strange island seemed to be aware of their coming.

Nona cried out, "Grant, we're going to fall right into it!"

Pemberton looked down at the small fiery pool with anxious eyes. Unless something happened, and that
quickly, they would be seared to a crisp. Already the heat was uncomfortable, even through their suits. He tried to
kick himself aside, but the pull of the liquid was too powerful for him. Then he resolved on a desperate expedient.

"Say, you fellows down there," he cried in the smooth, slurred Ganymedan speech. "What are you trying to do,
fyu? Hurry up and prepare our landing."

* * * * *

For a moment they were tense with the tenseness of imminent death. Were the Ganymedans equipped with
communication disks; would they sense the strangeness of the accent? Nona was gripping his hand with a pressure
that penetrated the fabric. And every second brought them down closer and closer to the dread lake.

"Ah!" Nona's breath came in a shuddering sigh. For one of the figures glanced upward and saw them dropping.
He shouted something to his fellows, and darted for a lever set in the stone next to the pool. He threw it over swiftly.
Immediately what seemed to be a smooth slab of transparent glassite shot into position over the pulsating flame, not
an instant too soon, either, for it had barely covered the flaming death when the Earthlings' feet were already
touching it.

"It would have served you two fools right if I had let you drop in," their savior grumbled disgustedly. "What in
Jupiter took you so long? Everyone else arrived hours ago. Didn't know there were any more."

"Sorry, but we couldn't help it," Grant responded carefully. "You see, we got mixed up in a scrap with some
Earthmen who evidently suspected us, just as we were diving out of the air-lock. We had the devil's own job of
beating them off."

"You too! The Chief came down foaming at the mouth. Some dumb Earthman almost throttled him before he
got away. He swears he'll blast Earth out of space. He's that mad. But here, I've got no time to be talking to your
fellows. I've got work to do. Better report to the Chief at once, and heaven help you. He's sure in a black rage at this
minute."

With that he moved away, over to the gang of Ganymedans holding the stone nozzle and looking expectantly
up at the large, round hole in the cloud ceiling.

Nona stood close to Grant. "What are they doing with the queer affair?" She indicated the nozzle.
"I'm afraid we'll find out only too soon," he answered grimly. "Look--" he broke off.

Far overhead, through the great round orifice, darted a tremendous shape, pointed, glittering.
"Why, that's the Althea," Nona exclaimed.
"Yes. Now watch. Damn--all we can do is watch," Grant gritted between his teeth.

Down sped the gleaming liner, pride of the fleet. The men at the mirror were swerving it on gimbals until a ray
from it flashed on the burnished nose. As though it were a physical impact, the vessel slackened its tremendous
speed and hung suspended midway between the cloud concavity and the island.

The men with the nozzle spurred into activity. A thin stream of fluid shot out of the orifice straight up for the
captive liner. The tip of the expanding spray impinged on the hull--and Nona gasped her astonishment. For the
liquid passed clean through the hull as though it were a porous network instead of four-inch thick beryllium-steel.

"Just as I thought," Grant groaned. "Lethal gas that penetrates everything. Those poor people on board--for
their own sakes I hope none remained alive to hit this."
"Can't we do anything?" Nona asked desperately.

"Nothing for the Althea. But plenty to prevent any more disasters like it." There was a hard ring to his voice.
"Come on." He stepped off the transparent slab onto the stone floor of the island.
"Where to?" asked Nona, following.
"We're going to locate that orange oval we saw from the Althea. That's the secret of all this. The pool of liquid
fire here is unimportant, secondary."

They were at one edge of the floating island. The other side was hidden from them by the solid wall that
stretched across its full diameter.
"We'll scout beyond there," Grant pointed out. "I'll miss my guess if what we're looking for is not on the other
side."

As they started for the wall, they saw the Althea brought slowly down to the rock, another captive to swell the
motionless fleet. It did not take them long to reach the barrier. Some fifty feet high it was, of smooth polished
Ganymedian stone, and no door or opening in its straight unbroken surface.

"How shall we get through?" Nona asked.
Grant surveyed it thoughtfully.
"There must be a hidden spring somewhere," he said.

He walked carelessly along the wall, tapping it idly here and there. His quick probing fingers were searching.

With a sharp "Ah!" he stopped short. He bent over a moment; his fingers moved deftly. Then he straightened
with a grunt of satisfaction. A section of the seemingly solid, immovable stone was sliding silently open. He looked
through.

Nona saw him jerk his head back, heard his involuntary cry of horror. Then she heard another cry: an excited
warning shout. She whirled around in time to see a Ganymedian running toward them from behind. A deadly pencil-
ray pointed straight at her companion. Without a moment's hesitation she sprang at Grant, pushed him violently so
that he staggered and fell through the opening to the other side. In so doing, she tripped over his body, and fell
prone. That saved her life, for a blue flame sheared clean through the stone, inches above her head.

Grant squirmed around underneath. The electro-gun was somehow out of the side flap and now it spat its
explosive hail. The tiny bullets flared into little puff balls of flame against the space-suit of the Ganymedian. A long
howl of anguish came to them as he threw up his hands and fell into a shapeless heap. But a moment later there were
other cries, angry shouts. Pemberton was on his feet again with the quickness of a cat. He pulled Nona up after him,
thrust her to one side, behind the protection of the wall. His eyes were blazing now, aflame with the ardor of battle.
Very carefully he leaned out and pressed the trigger. The surging mob was caught in full flight. The electro-bullets
spread fanwise, exploded into flaming deaths. The Ganymedans went down as though a huge scythe had swept
through their ranks. The survivors scattered hastily, throwing themselves headlong to the surface of the rock to
escape further execution.
"That'll hold them for a while," Grant laughed grimly. "Drop your gun, and turn around--both of you." A cold, smooth voice spoke in deadly menace directly behind them--a voice that came from the mysterious inner side of the wall.

Grant spun around, his gun ready to fire. A ray snapped out at him, a ray with a greenish tinge. The fingers of his gun hand grew suddenly nerveless; the weapon dropped unresistingly from his paralyzed hand.

A tall Ganymedan towered before him, unhidden by a space-suit. Evidently there was a layer of air in here. The red lidless eyes were filled with a cold fury. Spatulate fingers tensed on the button of a pencil ray.

"Miro," Grant breathed to himself unbelievingly. A great light burst upon him.

* * * * *

The Inspector of the Service for Ganymede did not recognize him, swathed as Grant was in the depths of his space-suit, nor did he notice the little movement of surprise. He was too furiously angry. His words came tumbling out in a tremble of rage.

"You damned scoundrels; have you gone mad? What do you mean by coming in here through the secret way? Don't you know it is death for anyone to pass the barrier? And what do you mean by shooting down your fellows with an Earth weapon? Answer, damn you, before I thrust you into the Gorm."

Both were silent; Nona because she did not know what to say, and Grant because he knew his voice would be recognized by Miro's keen ears. He kept his eyes fixed on the Ganymedan, waiting hawk-like for one false move, for the tiniest wavering of attention. But the pencil-ray was pointed squarely at his breast.

"You won't talk?" Miro's voice was choked with passion. "Well, there are ways to make you." With one foot he kicked at the open slab, while his weapon commanded them unwaveringly. There was a smooth soundless rush. Grant knew that the wall was an unbroken surface again. They were cut off on the secret side of the island, alone with Miro.

Yet that was the horror of it. They were not alone. For Grant's first darting look inside when he had first opened the panel had shown him the others. Hundreds of them there were, men of all races and planets, a motley crew. And each man walked stiffly, unnaturally, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Their eyes were fixed and glassy; the skin of their faces, no matter what their origin, was uniformly parched and gray. A cold sweat broke out on Grant's forehead. They looked like automatons: beings from whom life had been drained. He heard a little choked cry from Nona; she had seen them, too.

Miro plucked out with his free hand a little pear-shaped mechanism punctured with innumerable holes. He blew into it, once--twice. It gave forth a high whining note. Instantly two of the strange lifeless men wheeled angularly, and with queer mechanical movements headed straight for them. A bloodless hand stretched out, grasped Nona. Grant heard her scream and saw her struggling in a loathsome grip.

* * * * *

Forgetting everything, forgetting the deadly ray in Miro's hands, he sprang to her rescue. The next instant he was in the grip of a similar hand, a frail, dead-white naked arm, yet endowed with the strength of steel. Struggle as he might, dash his fist as hard as he could against the unresisting blank face, he could not loose that grip. Miro watched his futile strugglings mockingly.

"Take these traitors over to the Gorm and let me look at their faces," he ordered.

Grant and Nona were picked up in those emaciated, powerful arms as easily as though they were children, and the unhuman creatures proceeded at a slow, awkward pace away from the hall, toward the outer edge of the island. From his uncomfortable vantage point, Pemberton noticed that they were passing clumps of intricate stone machinery. Dead-faced automatons, similar to their captors, were tending the whirring machinery with ordered, stiff-legged movements.

Then, straight ahead, Grant saw the edge of the island, against which beat and billowed in furious, gigantic heaves, the reddish overarching clouds of the Great Spot. Strangely enough, though they whirled and eddied, they could not seem to break through the invisible barrier. And then the lake of fire sprang into view--the mysterious place of flame they had seen from afar, that had pulled the hapless Althea out of its course down to destruction on Jupiter. This then was the Gorm!

A wide circular pool it was, of an unearthly yellow-orange brilliance. The midday sun was no more dazzling to the eye. Out it stretched from the island into the vapors of the Great Red Spot, only touching the stone rim of the island at one thin point. Its liquid fires were waveless now, oily, yet there was something horrible, too, about its smooth quiescence.

Miro whistled. The rigid guards dropped their burdens roughly and stood at attention. One was an Earthman, the other a fish-faced Venusian. Yet the queer dead look of their eyes was exactly the same.

"Will you remove your helmets, or shall I ask the Doora to assist you?" Miro's voice was silky.

* * * * *
Because there was nothing else to do, Grant unscrewed his helmet and let it fall back on its hinge. Then he
looked very calmly and steadily at the Inspector of the Service for Ganymede.

A dull flame leaped into Miro's eyes at the sight of his captive.

"You!" Then he smiled, a peculiarly horrible smile. "You are cleverer than I thought, my Earth friend. You
should have been strangled to death on the Althea, or made into one of--"

He stopped short, and the smile widened cruelly. "But it is not too late. No, it is not too late."

Grant disregarded his cryptic phrases. He smiled, too, a contemptuous smile that cut like a lash.

"You, Miro, an Inspector of the Service, are only a lying, treacherous, butchering Ganymedan. Filthy scum of
the Universe."

Miro started forward with a roar, a dark flush of rage suffusing his green-tinged countenance. His blunt-edged
finger trembled on the button of the pencil-ray. Grant knew he was perilously on the verge of sudden death, yet his
scornful glance did not waver.

It was Nona, hitherto unnoticed, her helmet removed, who darted upon the giant Ganymedan with small beating
fists. Miro saw her coming and swung her sprawling away with one sweep of his free hand, while he covered Grant
with the other.

He had recovered his composure. Some secret merriment seemed to convulse him.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted. "Who is this little spitfire? By Jupiter, she is a tempting morsel." And his red eyes took
in the flushed beauty of the panting girl speculatively.

Grant tensed for a quick spring.

"Stand where you are," Miro barked. "One move and it will be your last." Gone was the smooth unctuous
speech of former times. His tone now was cutting, deadly.

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"You damned Earthmen have been crowing long enough," he said. "When Miro and Ganymede get through
with you, the very memory of your filthy planet will have been erased from the solar system." His voice rose higher.
"You thought you had us beaten down with your space-battleships and your embargoes on metals. And we were
meekly repentant. Oh yes, we were! We took you in nicely. Why, they even made me, Miro, Inspector of your rotten
Service.

"But we have been preparing against the day for years. Here on this island that we built we worked, hidden
from interference. We are ready now. Our fleets will sail out, in your own ships, to smash the combined space
navies of the solar system."

In spite of himself Grant could not hide a sudden grin of relief. The man was mad, to think of pitting a few
liners against armored battle craft. Miro saw that grin.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" he gloated. "Just listen to this, then. We have found a substance that no ray, no
electro-bullet can penetrate. Every ship will be coated with it. And the Gorm here"--he pointed to the oily lake--"will
draw your proud cruisers down to destruction, or thrust them far out into the uncharted spaces, helpless, just as it
pleases us. You wonder how it works? Look! Now it attracts, and powerfully. But when I reverse the current passing
through it like this"--he leaned over and pulled a switch set in the rock right by the edge--"it repels everything. We'll
just stand off in space and pick off your proud warships one by one, without a scratch to ourselves. See?" He fairly
hissed the last word.

Grant saw, and the cold sweat burst out on his forehead. His brain raced desperately in a vain effort to find
some way out, some method of foiling this beast.

"You sure talk big, Miro," he said in bored fashion, feigning indifference; "but it means nothing to me. The
point is, what do you intend doing with us?"

* * * * *

The Ganymedan's lips writhed. "Nothing at all to your pretty friend," he leered. "I have plans for her. But as for
you--see these creatures all about?"

"Well?"

"You are going to be one of them. They are passengers and crews who had the misfortune to be alive when the
captured ships were sprayed with our gas. It does not kill. Oh, no! It just numbs their faculties, paralyzes them. Then
our surgeons get busy. They know how to remove the memory and reasoning areas of the brain and leave just
machines, automata, to do our bidding. Clever, aren't they? When Earth is captured, I intend subjecting all your
damned breed to the operation. They make very willing slaves, I've found. Two blasts on this toy"--he raised the
whistle to his lips--"and an Earth-Doora comes for you."

Nona sprang forward. "No, no, Miro. Please do not touch Mr. Pemberton. I'll--I'll--"

"What will you?" The Ganymedan's pig-eyes devoured her.

"I'll--" Then, to Grant's eternal horror, she sank into Miro's arms. The surprised look on Miro's face changed
slowly to one of passion, as he held her close to him with his great hairy arm.

"Nona!" Grant gasped and saw red. Heedless of the unwavering weapon at his breast, he sprang. Miro snarled as he saw him coming. His finger pressed down. But at that instant the Earth girl struck out with all the power of her slender arm. It was not much of a blow, but it managed to jar the weapon aside. The blue flame leaped hissing through the air.

Miro roared with rage, and flung her yards away, to lie, an unmoving pathetic bundle. Then he swung his ray back into play.

But he never had a chance to use it. All the strength and fury of Grant's lithe, steel sinews and bone were behind the solid smash that landed squarely on the Ganymedan's chin. He went down in a slump, completely out.

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Grant stooped to pick up the fallen pencil-ray, thrust it in the side flap, then hurried over to the limp figure of Nona.

"Darling," he cried, "if anything's happened to you, I'll--"

The still form stirred, sat up.

"Say that again." She was smiling weakly, but happily.

Grant flushed. "As many times later as you'll want," he said, "but now that you're not hurt, we can't waste any time in trying to get out of here."

He walked over to Miro, who was just coming to.

"Listen, you rat," he told the Ganymedan, who was rubbing his chin and groaning: "you do exactly as I say, if you know what's good for you." He shook the pencil-ray significantly.

"You can't get away with it," Miro snarled, muttering a string of curses. There was baffled rage in his red pig-eyes.

Grant surveyed him coldly.

"We'll see about that," he snapped. "Get up." He reinforced his demand with a well-placed kick. The huge Ganymedan came quickly to his feet.

"Walk to the wall," was the next order, "and open the trick door."

With a glance of savage hate, Miro obeyed. Grant followed him with his pistol in readiness. The poor mindless creatures paid no heed to what was going on, but dully continued their appointed tasks.

Pemberton hid himself behind the wall to one side. Nona did likewise, having picked up the electro-gun meanwhile. Only Miro stood before the opening.

"Now tell your cutthroat friends out there we want one of the liners brought directly over the Gorm, you understand. Not the Althea, though—that's still full of holes. And only one Ganymedan to guide her over the wall. Be very explicit, and not a false move out of you, or it'll be your last."

With the knowledge that two deadly weapons were pointing squarely at him, Miro shouted unwillingly the necessary instructions to his subordinates outside. Then Grant leaned over and kicked the slide shut.

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There followed tense moments of waiting. Would the workers beyond obey their leader? Had they become suspicious, and were even now massing for a surprise attack? Grant had no means of telling.

Then to his ears came the most welcome soft roar of muted rockets. A huge shape swept over the high wall, soared directly over the Gorm, and nestled down in little jets of flame until the stern rested on the solid rock, and the bow swung idly over the brilliant pool.

"Keep your gun trained on this bird," Grant told Nona swiftly. She nodded. The air-lock door on the ship was already sliding open. A Ganymedan, space-suited, was coming through. He saw them, tried to spring back into the shelter of the ship. But a blue ray stabbed out and caught him in mid-flight. There was a spatter of dust, and the hapless creature disintegrated into thin air.

"Sorry I had to do it, but I couldn't afford to let him give the alarm. Now for the dirty work, Nona. You hustle this big bully into the ship, and keep him covered. I'll be right along."

The girl cast him a look of anxiety. "What do you intend doing?"

"Don't worry," he assured her; "I won't get hurt."

After he had seen them within the liner, he got to work. First he brought out from the ship coils of wiring and jumbles of instruments. He took them over to the edge of the Gorm, to the place where he had seen Miro pull the switch, and for the next ten minutes was busy connecting wires, attaching batteries, putting his instruments in place. Then, when he was satisfied that everything was ready, he reversed the switch. The great space-ship, some fifty feet away, was already trembling in every line.

Just as he was rising to sprint for the slowly moving liner, he heard a smooth rushing noise. He whirled. The slide was opening in the wall. A mob of Ganymedans were pouring through. They paused uncertainly a moment,
then, as they spied him, there was a concerted rush forward.

Grant acted quickly. Already the space-ship was off the ground, soaring upward. He had not an instant to spare. He dove toward it. The mob yelled, and raced forward to cut him off. His pencil-ray was useless--the distance was too great for its limited range. But then, that applied equally to the weapons of the Ganymedans.

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The blue rays snapped forward at him angrily, but fell short. The ship was moving faster now. It was already several feet off the ground. Grant’s heavy space-suit impeded his progress. The charging Ganymedans were dangerously close now. That last beam had missed him by inches. The ship was gathering speed. He was five feet away from the open air-lock when they got the range. A sharp searing pain right across his shoulder. The creatoid material of his suit was cut away as with a knife. A layer of flesh lay exposed. The skin had been whiffed into nothingness.

But that very instant he was leaping off the ground with a mighty effort. The ship was going upward with a rush now. His fingers clawed desperately at the edge of the air-lock. For one breathless instant he clung; then, to his horror, the smooth creatoid covering refused to hold. Slowly he slipped, in spite of every effort, as the surface of the hull refused purchase to his bleeding hands, then down he went with a thud.

A cry of triumph arose from the onrushing Ganymedans as Grant scrambled to his feet, bruised and shaken. He cast a swift, despairing glance upward. The huge liner was a hundred feet up now, gathering speed swiftly. To one side was the Gorm, a place of dread and menace. The gloating enemy were almost upon him. Even the comfort of a weapon, the grim satisfaction of taking some of his foes to death with him, was denied him.

The pencil-ray had been jarred out of his hand by the impact and had doubtless fallen into the Gorm.

Grant felt that he had come to the end of the rope. There was no tremor of fear in him, only regret that he had met the girl and lost her so soon. What would she do, out in space, alone with Miro? No time to think of that now, though. The foremost of the Ganymedans were almost upon him. They intended taking him alive, did they? He braced himself for the attack, ready to go down fighting.

* * * * *

Then a brilliant plan beat suddenly upon his dazzled mind. It was breath-taking, so simple, yet so desperate did it appear. If it worked--he would win through. If not--but Grant dismissed that thought quickly; one form of death was no worse than another.

Without an instant’s hesitation, he whirled and jumped as high as he could--directly over the Gorm! There was a yell of astonishment from the Ganymedans--one had already clutched at his intended victim--as they fell back in horror from the edge. This Earthling was mad to brave the terrors of the Gorm!

But Grant heard nothing. He was instantly conscious of a searing, racking pain that penetrated his every fiber. He forced his eyes upward, anywhere but beneath him. Was his theory correct, or was he destined to drop into the fiery lake. For a single interminable instant, he suffered untold agonies.

Then his body quivered, and he felt an unmistakable push against him. He was moving upward, just as he had hoped. The Gorm was repelling him, even as it had the ship.

Faster and faster he shot up, chasing the liner. Would he catch up with it? He strained his eyes. Exultation flooded through him as he realized that the distance was rapidly lessening between them. The added impetus of his leap over the Gorm had given him the required extra fillip of speed. By now, rays were streaking by him.

Soon he was directly underneath. For an instant he had a quick fear that he might overshoot his mark. But no--he was sliding past the open air-lock. He threw himself sideways and caught at it. This time his fingers held.

As he squirmed and wriggled into the lock, they were already careening into the orange tube through the red swirling clouds. There was no longer any air. Choking, he managed with numbed fingers to screw his helmet on. Then, closing the lock, he proceeded into the ship.

Nona was guarding her prisoner vigilantly. Miro sat there, sullen, defiant. Her glad, welcoming cry filled Grant with a new strange warmth.

"I was so afraid for you when the ship started and you didn't show up," she said, "but I didn't dare leave him alone." She indicated Miro.

"Good girl," he said admiringly. "We'll bind him now and then I want to show you something."

* * * * *

They stood a little later at the bow quartz port-hole. Down the long shaft through which they had risen they saw the glaring flame of the Gorm. As they looked, its regular pulsations turned irregular: it leaped and splashed as though it was a stormy, choppy sea. Then it gave one final mighty heave, and the universe seemed to shatter beneath them. The “walls” of the shaft collapsed about them and they were enswathed in a raging storm of red clouds.

Nona turned to Grant. "Now, will you explain?"

"Certainly," he grinned boyishly. "I simply reversed the switch that changes the current of the Gorm. I knew
that it would then repel the liner out into space, as Miro was incautious enough to inform me.

"Then I figured that if instead of direct current, an alternating flow could be induced, so as to attract and repel in quick succession, enough of a disturbance would be raised in that highly unstable mixture to start fireworks. So I rigged up an automatic break in the circuit, timed it to permit us to get up enough speed from the repulsion to be safely on our way before it would start. The circuit-breaker worked and the alternating current did the rest. That island is wiped out, and so is the Gorm. There'll be no further threat of danger to the solar system from that."

"And Miro, what are we going to do with him?"

"Turn him over to the Service. They'll take care of him. And now, young lady, if you have no further questions, shall I say it again?"

She smiled up at him tenderly, answering:

"If you wish."

GONE FISHING
By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

There is no predictable correlation between intelligence and ethics, nor is ruthlessness necessarily an evil thing. And there is nothing like enforced, uninterrupted contemplation to learn to distinguish one from another....

Barney Chard, thirty-seven--financier, entrepreneur, occasional blackmailer, occasional con man, and very competent in all these activities--stood on a rickety wooden lake dock, squinting against the late afternoon sun, and waiting for his current business prospect to give up the pretense of being interested in trying to catch fish.

The prospect, who stood a few yards farther up the dock, rod in one hand, was named Dr. Oliver B. McAllen. He was a retired physicist, though less retired than was generally assumed. A dozen years ago he had rated as one of the country's top men in his line. And, while dressed like an aging tramp in what he had referred to as fishing togs, he was at the moment potentially the country's wealthiest citizen. There was a clandestine invention he'd fathered which he called the McAllen Tube. The Tube was the reason Barney Chard had come to see McAllen.

Gently raising and lowering the fishing rod, and blinking out over the quiet water, Dr. McAllen looked preoccupied with disturbing speculations not connected with his sport. The man had a secrecy bug. The invention, Barney thought, had turned out to be bigger than the inventor. McAllen was afraid of the Tube, and in the forefront of his reflections must be the inescapable fact that the secret of the McAllen Tube could no longer be kept without Barney Chard's co-operation. Barney had evidence of its existence, and didn't really need the evidence. A few hints dropped here and there would have made McAllen's twelve years of elaborate precaution quite meaningless.

Ergo, McAllen must be pondering now, how could one persuade Mr. Chard to remain silent?

But there was a second consideration Barney had planted in the old scientist's mind. Mr. Chard, that knowledgeable man of the world, exuded not at all by chance the impression of great quantities of available cash. His manner, the conservatively tailored business suit, the priceless chip of a platinum watch ... and McAllen needed cash badly. He'd been fairly wealthy himself at one time; but since he had refrained from exploiting the Tube's commercial possibilities, his continuing work with it was exhausting his capital. At least that could be assumed to be the reason for McAllen's impoverishment, which was a matter Barney had established. In months the old man would be living on beans.

Ergo again, McAllen's thoughts must be running, how might one not merely coax Mr. Chard into silence, but actually get him to come through with some much-needed financial support? What inducement, aside from the Tube, could be offered someone in his position?

Barney grinned inwardly as he snapped the end of his cigarette out on the amber-tinted water. The mark always sells himself, and McAllen was well along in the process. Polite silence was all that was necessary at the moment. He lit a fresh cigarette, feeling a mild curiosity about the little lake's location. Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan seemed equally probable guesses. What mattered was that half an hour ago McAllen's Tube had brought them both here in a wink of time from his home in California.

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Dr. McAllen thoughtfully cleared his throat.

"Ever do any fishing, Mr. Chard?" he asked. After getting over his first shock at Barney's revelations, he'd
begun speaking again in the brisk, abrupt manner Barney remembered from the last times he'd heard McAllen's voice.

"No," Barney admitted smiling. "Never quite got around to it."
"Always been too busy, eh?"
"With this and that," Barney agreed.

McAllen cleared his throat again. He was a roly-poly little man; over seventy now but still healthy-looking, with an apple-cheeked, sunburned face. Over a pair of steel-rimmed glasses his faded blue eyes peered musingly at Barney. "Around thirty-five, aren't you?"

"Thirty-seven."
"Married?"
"Divorced."
"Any particular hobbies?"
Barney laughed. "I play a little golf. Not very seriously."

McAllen clicked his tongue. "Well, what do you do for fun?"
"Oh ... I'd say I enjoy almost anything I get involved in." Barney, still smiling, felt a touch of wariness. He'd been expecting questions from McAllen, but not quite this kind.

"Mainly making money, eh? Well," McAllen conceded, "that's not a bad hobby. Practical, too. I ... whup! Just a moment."

The tip of the slender rod in his left hand dipped slightly, and sixty feet out beyond the end of the old dock a green and white bobber began twitching about. Then the bobber suddenly disappeared. McAllen lifted the rod tip a foot or two with a smooth, swift motion, and paused.

"Hooked!" he announced, looking almost childishly pleased.

The fish on the far end of the line didn't seem to put up much of a struggle, but the old man reeled it in slowly and carefully, giving out line from time to time, then taking it back. He seemed completely absorbed. Not until the fish had been worked close to the dock was there a brief minor commotion near the surface. Then McAllen was down on one knee, holding the rod high with one hand, reaching out for his catch with the other. Barney had a glimpse of an unimpressive green and silver disk, reddish froggy eyes. "Very nice crappie!" McAllen informed him with a broad smile. "Now--" He placed the rod on the dock, reached down with his other hand. The fish's tail slapped the water; it turned sideways, was gone.

"Lost it!" Barney commented, surprised.

"Huh?" McAllen looked around. "Well, no, young man--I turned him loose. He wasn't hooked bad. Crappies have delicate lips, but I use a barbless hook. Gives them better than a fighting chance." He stood up with the rod, dusting the knees of his baggy slacks. "Get all the eating fish I want anyway," he added.

"You really enjoy that sport, don't you?" Barney said curiously.

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McAllen advised him with the seriousness of the true devotee to try it some time. "It gets to you. It can get to be a way of living. I've been fishing since I was knee-high. Three years ago I figured I'd become good enough to write a book on the subject. I got more arguments over that book--sounder arguments too, I'd say--than about any paper I've published in physics." He looked at Barney a moment, still seriously, and went on. "I told you wetting a line would calm me down after that upset you gave me. Well, it has--fishing is as good a form of therapy as I know about. Now I've been doing some thinking. I'd be interested ... well, I'd like to talk some more about the Tube with you, Mr. Chard. And perhaps about other things too."

"Very gratifying to hear that, doctor," Barney said gravely. "I did regret having to upset you, you know."

McAllen shrugged. "No harm done. It's given me some ideas. We'll talk right here." He indicated the weather-beaten little cabin on the bank behind Barney. "I'm not entirely sure about the California place. That's one reason I suggested this trip."

"You feel your houseman there mightn't be entirely reliable?"

"Fredericks unreliable? Heavens no! He knows about the Tube, of course, but Fredericks expects me to invent things. It wouldn't occur to him to talk to an outsider. He's been with me for almost forty years."

"He was," remarked Barney, "listening in on the early part of our conversation today."

"Well, he'll do that," McAllen agreed. "He's very curious about anyone who comes to see me. But otherwise ... no, it's just that in these days of sophisticated listening devices one shouldn't ever feel too sure of not being overheard."

"True enough." Barney glanced up at the cabin. "What makes you so sure of it here, doctor?"

"No reason why anyone would go to the trouble," McAllen said. "The property isn't in my name. And the nearest neighbor lives across the lake. I never come here except by the Tube so I don't attract any attention."
He led the way along the dock. Barney Chard followed, eyes reflectively on the back of McAllen's sunburned neck and the wisps of unclipped white hair sticking out beneath his beaked fishing cap. Barney had learned to estimate accurately the capacity for physical violence in people he dealt with. He would have offered long odds that neither Dr. McAllen nor Fredericks, the elderly colored man of all work, had the capacity. But Barney's right hand, slid idly into the pocket of his well-tailored coat, was resting on a twenty-five caliber revolver. This was, after all, a very unusual situation. The human factors in themselves were predictable. Human factors were Barney's specialty. But here they were involved with something unknown—the McAllen Tube.

When it was a question of his personal safety, Barney Chard preferred to take no chances at all.

From the top of the worn wooden steps leading up to the cabin, he glanced back at the lake. It occurred to him there should have been at least a suggestion of unreality about that placid body of water, and the sun low and red in the west beyond it. Not that he felt anything of the kind. But less than an hour ago they had been sitting in McAllen's home in Southern California, and beyond the olive-green window shades it had been bright daylight.

"But I can't ... I really can't imagine," Dr. McAllen had just finished bumbling, his round face a study of controlled dismay on the other side of the desk, "whatever could have brought you to these ... these extraordinary conclusions, young man."

Barney had smiled reassuringly, leaning back in his chair. "Well, indirectly, sir, as the pictures indicate, we might say it was your interest in fishing. You see, I happened to notice you on Mallorca last month...."

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By itself, the chance encounter on the island had seemed only moderately interesting. Barney was sitting behind the wheel of an ancient automobile, near a private home in which a business negotiation of some consequence was being conducted. The business under discussion happened to be Barney's, but it would have been inexpedient for him to attend the meeting in person. Waiting for his associates to wind up the matter, he was passing time by studying an old man who was fishing from a small boat offshore, a hundred yards or so below the road. After a while the old fellow brought the boat in, appeared a few minutes later along the empty lane carrying his tackle and an apparently empty gunny sack, and trudged unheedingly past the automobile and its occupant. As he went by, Barney had a sudden sense of recognition. Then, in a flash, his mind jumped back twelve years.

Dr. Oliver B. McAllen. Twelve years ago the name had been an important one in McAllen's field; then it was not so much forgotten as deliberately buried. Working under government contract at one of the big universities, McAllen had been suddenly and quietly retired. Barney, who had a financial interest in one of the contracts, had made inquiries; he was likely to be out of money if McAllen had been taken from the job. Eventually he was informed, in strict confidence, that Dr. McAllen had flipped. Under the delusion of having made a discovery of tremendous importance, he had persuaded the authorities to arrange a demonstration. When the demonstration ended in complete failure, McAllen angrily accused some of his most eminent colleagues of having sabotaged his invention, and withdrew from the university. To protect a once great scientist's name, the matter was being hushed up.

So Mallorca was where the addled old physicist had elected to end his days—not a bad choice either, Barney had thought, gazing after the retreating figure. Pleasant island in a beautiful sea—he remembered having heard about McAllen's passion for angling.

A day later, the Mallorca business profitably concluded, Barney flew back to Los Angeles. That evening he entertained a pair of tanned and shapely ladies whose idea of high fun was to drink all night and go deep-sea fishing at dawn. Barney shuddered inwardly at the latter notion, but promised to see the sporting characters to the Sweetwater Beach Municipal Pier in time to catch a party boat, and did so. One of the girls, he noticed not without satisfaction—he had become a little tired of the two before morning—appeared a few minutes later along the empty lane carrying his tackle and an apparently empty gunny sack, and trudged unheedingly past the automobile and its occupant. As he went by, Barney had a sudden sense of recognition. Then, in a flash, his mind jumped back twelve years.

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He grew aware of what it was while he watched the party boat head out to sea a few minutes later, smiled at what seemed an impossibly fanciful concoction of his unconscious, and started towards the pier's parking lot. But when he had reached his car, climbed in, turned on the ignition, and lit a cigarette, the notion was still with him and Barney was no longer smiling. Fanciful it was, extremely so. Impossible, in the strict sense, it was not. The longer
he played it around, the more he began to wonder whether his notion mightn't hold water after all. If there was anything to it, he had run into one of the biggest deals in history.

Later Barney realized he would still have let the matter drop there if it hadn't been for other things, having nothing to do with Dr. McAllen. He was between operations at present. His time wasn't occupied. Furthermore he'd been aware lately that ordinary operations had begun to feel flat. The kick of putting over a deal, even on some other hard, bright character of his own class, unaccountably was fading. Barney Chard was somewhat frightened because the operator game was the only one he'd ever found interesting; the other role of well-heeled playboy wasn't much more than a manner of killing time. At thirty-seven he was realizing he was bored with life. He didn't like the prospect.

Now here was something which might again provide him with some genuine excitement. It could be simply his imagination working overtime, but it wasn't going to do any harm to find out. Mind humming with pleased though still highly skeptical speculations, Barney went back to the boat station and inquired when the party boat was due to return.

He was waiting for it, well out of sight, as it came chugging up to the wharf some hours later. He had never had anything to do directly with Dr. McAllen, so the old man wouldn't recognize him. But he didn't want to be spotted by his two amazons who might feel refreshed enough by now to be ready for another tour of the town.

He needn't have worried. The ladies barely made it to the top of the stairs; they phoned for a cab and were presently whisked away. Dr. McAllen meanwhile also had made a telephone call, and settled down not far from Barney to wait. A small gray car, five or six years old but of polished and well-tended appearance, trundled presently up the pier, came into the turnaround at the boat station, and stopped. A thin old Negro, with hair as white as the doctor's, held the door open for McAllen. The car moved unhurriedly off with them.

The automobile's license number produced Dr. McAllen's California address for Barney a short while later. The physicist lived in Sweetwater Beach, fifteen minutes' drive from the pier, in an old Spanish-type house back in the hills. The chauffeur's name was John Emanuel Fredericks; he had been working for McAllen for an unknown length of time. No one else lived there.

Barney didn't bother with further details about the Sweetwater Beach establishment at the moment. The agencies he usually employed to dig up background information were reasonably trustworthy, but he wanted to attract no more attention than was necessary to his interest in Dr. McAllen.

That evening he took a plane to New York.

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Physicist Frank Elby was a few years older than Barney, an acquaintance since their university days. Elby was ambitious, capable, slightly dishonest; on occasion he provided Barney with contraband information for which he was generously paid.

Over lunch Barney broached a business matter which would be financially rewarding to both of them, and should not burden Elby's conscience unduly. Elby reflected, and agreed. The talk became more general. Presently Barney remarked, "Ran into an old acquaintance of ours the other day. Remember Dr. McAllen?"

"Oliver B. McAllen? Naturally. Haven't heard about him in years. What's he doing?"

Barney said he had only seen the old man, hadn't spoken to him. But he was sure it was McAllen.

"Where was this?" Elby asked.

"Sweetwater Beach. Small town down the Coast."

Elby nodded. "It must have been McAllen. That's where he had his home."

"He was looking hale and hearty. They didn't actually institutionalize him at the time of his retirement, did they?"

"Oh, no. No reason for it. Except on the one subject of that cockeyed invention of his, he behaved perfectly normally. Besides he would have hired a lawyer and fought any such move. He had plenty of money. And nobody wanted publicity. McAllen was a pretty likable old boy."

"The university never considered taking him back?"

Elby laughed. "Well, hardly! After all, man--a matter transmitter!"

Barney felt an almost electric thrill of pleasure. Right on the nose, Brother Chard! Right on the nose.

He smiled. "Was that what it was supposed to be? I never was told all the details."

Elby said that for the few who were informed of the details it had been a seven-day circus. McAllen's reputation was such that more people, particularly on his staff, had been ready to believe him that were ready to admit it later. "When he'd left--you know, he never even bothered to take that 'transmitter' along--the thing was taken apart and checked over as carefully as if somebody thought it might still suddenly start working. But it was an absolute Goldberg, of course. The old man had simply gone off his rocker."

"Hadn't there been any indication of it before?"
"Not that I know of. Except that he'd been dropping hints about his gadget for several months before he showed it to anyone," Elby said indifferently. The talk turned to other things.

The rest was routine, not difficult to carry out. A small cottage on Mallorca, near the waterfront, was found to be in McAllen's name. McAllen's liquid assets were established to have dwindled to something less than those of John Emanuel Fredericks, who patronized the same local bank as his employer. There had been frequent withdrawals of large, irregular sums throughout the past years. The withdrawals were not explained by McAllen's frugal personal habits; even his fishing excursions showed an obvious concern for expense. The retention of the Mediterranean retreat, modest though it was, must have a reason beyond simple self-indulgence.

Barney arranged for the rental of a bungalow in the outskirts of Sweetwater beach, which lay uphill from the old house in which McAllen and Fredericks lived, and provided a good view of the residence and its street entry. He didn't go near the place himself. Operatives of a Los Angeles detective agency went on constant watch in the bungalow, with orders to photograph the two old men in the other house and any visitors at every appearance, and to record the exact times the pictures were taken. At the end of each day the photographs were delivered to an address from where they promptly reached Barney's hands.

A European agency was independently covering the Mallorca cottage in the same manner.

Nearly four weeks passed before Barney obtained the exact results he wanted. He called off the watch at both points, and next day came up the walk to McAllen's home and rang the doorbell. John Fredericks appeared, studied Barney's card and Barney with an air of mild disapproval, and informed him that Dr. McAllen did not receive visitors.

"So I've been told," Barney acknowledged pleasantly. "Please be so good as to give the doctor this."

Fredericks' white eyebrows lifted by the barest trifle as he looked at the sealed envelope Barney was holding out. After a moment's hesitation he took it, instructed Barney to wait, and closed the door firmly.

Listening to Fredericks' footsteps receding into the house, Barney lit a cigarette, and was pleased to find that his hands were as steady as if he had been on the most ordinary of calls. The envelope contained two sets of photographs, dated and indicating the time of day. The date was the same for both sets; the recorded time showed the pictures had been taken within fifteen minutes of one another. The central subject in each case was Dr. McAllen, sometimes accompanied by Fredericks. One set of photographs had been obtained on Mallorca, the other in Sweetwater Beach at McAllen's house.

Barring rocket assists, the two old men had been documented as the fastest moving human beings in all history.

Several minutes passed before Fredericks reappeared. With a face which was now completely without expression, he invited Barney to enter, and conducted him to McAllen's study. The scientist had the photographs spread out on a desk before him. He gestured at them.

"Just what--if anything--is this supposed to mean, sir?" he demanded in an unsteady voice.

Barney hesitated aware that Fredericks had remained in the hall just beyond the study. But Fredericks obviously was in McAllen's confidence. His eavesdropping could do no harm.

"It means this, doctor--" Barney began, amiably enough; and he proceeded to tell McAllen precisely what the photographs meant. McAllen broke in protestingly two or three times, then let Barney conclude his account of the steps he had taken to verify his farfetched hunch on the pier without further comment. After a few minutes Barney heard Fredericks' steps moving away, and then a door closing softly somewhere, and he shifted his position a trifle so that his right side was now toward the hall door. The little revolver was in the right-hand coat pocket. Even then Barney had no real concern that McAllen or Fredericks would attempt to resort to violence, but when people are acutely disturbed--and McAllen at least was--almost anything can happen.

When Barney finished, McAllen stared down at the photographs again, shook his head, and looked over at Barney.

"If you don't mind," he said, blinking behind his glasses, "I should like to think about this for a minute or two."

"Of course, doctor," Barney said politely. McAllen settled back in the chair, removed his glasses and half closed his eyes. Barney let his gaze rove. The furnishings of the house were what he had expected--well-tended, old, declining here and there to the downright shabby. The only reasonably new piece in the study was a radio-phonograph. The walls of the study and of the section of a living room he could see through a small archway were lined with crammed bookshelves. At the far end of the living room was a curious collection of clocks in various types and sizes, mainly antiques, but also some odd metallic pieces with modernistic faces. Vacancies in the rows indicated Fredericks might have begun to dispose discreetly of the more valuable items on his employer's behalf.

McAllen cleared his throat finally, opened his eyes, and settled the spectacles back on his nose.

"Mr. Chard," he inquired, "have you had scientific training?"
"No."
"Then," said McAllen, "the question remains of what your interest in the matter is. Perhaps you'd like to explain just why you put yourself to such considerable expense to intrude on my personal affairs--"
Barney hesitated perceptibly. "Doctor," he said, "there is something tantalizing about an enigma. I'm fortunate in having the financial means to gratify my curiosity when it's excited to the extent it was here."
McAllen nodded. "I can understand curiosity. Was that your only motive?"
Barney gave him his most disarming grin. "Frankly no. I've mentioned I'm a businessman--"
"Ah!" McAllen said, frowning.
"Don't misunderstand me. One of my first thoughts admittedly was that here were millions waiting to be picked up. But the investigation soon made a number of things clear to me."
"What were they?"
"Essentially, that you had so sound a reason for keeping your invention a secret that to do it you were willing to ruin yourself financially, and to efface yourself as a human being and as a scientist."
"I don't feel," McAllen observed mildly, "that I really have effaced myself, either as a human being or as a scientist."
"No, but as far as the public was concerned you did both."
McAllen smiled briefly. "That stratagem was very effective--until now. Very well, Mr. Chard. You understand clearly that under no circumstances would I agree to the commercialization of ... well, of my matter transmitter?"
Barney nodded. "Of course."
"And you're still interested?"
"Very much so."
McAllen was silent for a few seconds, biting reflectively at his lower lip. "Very well," he said again. "You were speaking of my predilection for fishing. Perhaps you'd care to accompany me on a brief fishing trip?"
"Now?" Barney asked.
"Yes, now. I believe you understand what I mean ... I see you do. Then, if you'll excuse me for a few minutes--"
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Barney couldn't have said exactly what he expected to be shown. His imaginings had run in the direction of a camouflaged vault beneath McAllen's house--some massively-walled place with machinery that powered the matter transmitter purring along the walls ... and perhaps something in the style of a plastic diving bell as the specific instrument of transportation.
The actual experience was quite different. McAllen returned shortly, having changed into the familiar outdoor clothing--apparently he had been literal about going on a fishing trip. Barney accompanied the old physicist into the living room, and watched him open a small but very sturdy wall safe. Immediately behind the safe door, an instrument panel had been built in the opening.
Peering over the spectacles, McAllen made careful adjustments on two sets of small dials, and closed and locked the safe again.
"Now, if you'll follow me, Mr. Chard--" He crossed the room to a door, opened it, and went out. Barney followed him into a small room with rustic furnishings and painted wooden walls. There was a single, heavily curtained window; the room was rather dim.
"Well," McAllen announced, "here we are."
It took a moment for that to sink in. Then, his scalp prickling eerily, Barney realized he was standing farther from the wall than he had thought. He looked around, and discovered there was no door behind him now, either open or closed.
He managed a shaky grin. "So that's how your matter transmitter works!"
"Well," McAllen said thoughtfully, "of course it isn't really a matter transmitter. I call it the McAllen Tube. Even an educated layman must realize that one can't simply disassemble a living body at one point, reassemble it at another, and expect life to resume. And there are other considerations--"
"Where are we?" Barney asked. "On Mallorca?"
"No. We haven't left the continent--just the state. Look out the window and see for yourself."
McAllen turned to a built-in closet, and Barney drew back the window hangings. Outside was a grassy slope, uncult and yellowed by the summer sun. The slope dropped sharply to a quiet lakefront framed by dark pines. There was no one in sight, but a small wooden dock ran out into the lake. At the far end of the dock an old rowboat lay tethered. And--quite obviously--it was no longer the middle of a bright afternoon; the air was beginning to dim, to shift towards evening.
Barney turned to find McAllen's mild, speculative eyes on him, and saw the old man had put a tackle box and fishing rod on the table.
"Your disclosures disturbed me more than you may have realized," McAllen remarked by way of explanation. His lips twitched in the shadow of a smile. "At such times I find nothing quite so soothing as to drop a line into water for a while. I've got some thinking to do, too. So let's get down to the dock. There ought to be a little bait left in the minnow pail."

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When they returned to the cabin some time later, McAllen was in a pensive mood. He started a pot of coffee in the small kitchen, then quickly cleaned the tackle and put it away. Barney sat at the table, smoking and watching him, but made no attempt at conversation.

McAllen poured the coffee, produced sugar and powdered milk, and settled down opposite Barney. He said abruptly, "Have you had any suspicions about the reason for the secretive mumbo jumbo?"

"Yes," Barney said, "I've had suspicions. But it wasn't until that happened"--he waved his hand at the wall out of which they appeared to have stepped--"that I came to a definite conclusion."

"Eh?" McAllen's eyes narrowed suddenly. "What was the conclusion?"

"That you've invented something that's really a little too good."

"Too good?" said McAllen. "Hm-m-m. Go on."

"It doesn't take much power to operate the thing, does it?"

"Not," said McAllen dryly, "if you're talking about the kind of power one pays for."

"I am. Can the McAllen Tube be extended to any point on Earth?"

"I should think so."

"And you financed the building of this model yourself. Not very expensive. If the secret leaked out, I'd never know who was going to materialize in my home at any time, would I? Or with what intentions."

"That," McAllen nodded, "is about the size of it."

Barney crushed out his cigarette, lit a fresh one, blew out a thin streamer of smoke. "Under the circumstances," he remarked, "it's unfortunate you can't get the thing shut off again, isn't it?"

McAllen was silent for some seconds. "So you've guessed that, too," he said finally. "What mistake did I make?"

"None that I know of," Barney said. "But you're doing everything you can to keep the world from learning about the McAllen Tube. At the same time you've kept it in operation--which made it just a question of time before somebody else noticed something was going on, as I did. Your plans for the thing appear to have gone wrong."

McAllen was nodding glumly. "They have," he said. "They have, Mr. Chard. Not irreparably wrong, but still--" He paused. "The first time I activated the apparatus," he said, "I directed it only at two points. Both of them within structures which were and are my property. It was fortunate I did so."

"That was this cabin and the place on Mallorca?"

"Yes. The main operational sections of the Tube are concealed about my California home. But certain controls have to be installed at any exit point to make it possible to return. It wouldn't be easy to keep those hidden in any public place.

"It wasn't until I compared the actual performance of the Tube with my theoretical calculations that I discovered there was an unforeseen factor involved. To make it short, I could not--to use your phrasing--shut the Tube off again. But that would certainly involve some extremely disastrous phenomena at three different points of our globe."

"Explosions?" Barney asked.

"Weee-ll," McAllen said judiciously, "implusions might come a little closer to describing the effect. The exact term isn't contained in our vocabulary, and I'd prefer it not to show up there, at least in my lifetime. But you see my dilemma, don't you? If I asked for help, I revealed the existence of the Tube. Once its existence was known, the research that produced it could be duplicated. As you concluded, it isn't really too difficult a device to construct. And even with the present problem solved, the McAllen Tube is just a little too dangerous a thing to be at large in our world today."

"You feel the problem can be solved?"

"Oh, yes." McAllen took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "That part of it's only a matter of time. At first I thought I'd have everything worked out within three or four years. Unfortunately I badly underestimated the expense of some of the required experimentation. That's what's delayed everything."

"I see. I had been wondering," Barney admitted, "why a man with something like this on his mind would be putting in quite so much time fishing."

McAllen grinned. "Enforced idleness. It's been very irritating really, Mr. Chard. I've been obliged to proceed in the most inexpensive manner possible, and that meant--very slowly."

Barney said, "If it weren't for that question of funds, how long would it take to wind up the operation?"
"A year--perhaps two years." McAllen shrugged. "It's difficult to be too exact, but it certainly wouldn't be longer than two."

"And what would be the financial tab?"
McAllen hesitated. "A million is the bottom figure, I'm afraid. It should run closer to a million and a half."

"Doctor," Barney said, "let me make you a proposition."

McAllen looked at him. "Are you thinking of financing the experiments, Mr. Chard?"

"In return," Barney said, "for a consideration."

"What's that?" McAllen's expression grew wary.

"When you retired," Barney told him, "I dropped a nice piece of money as a consequence. It was the first beating I'd taken, and it hurt. I'd like to pick that money up again. All right. We're agreed it can't be done on the McAllen Tube. The Tube wouldn't help make the world a safer place for Barney Chard. But the Tube isn't any more remarkable than the mind that created it. Now I know a company which could be top of the heap in electronics precision work--one-shot specialties is what they go in for--if it had your mind as technical advisor. I can buy a controlling interest in that company tomorrow, doctor. And you can have the million and a half paid off in not much more time than you expect to take to get your monster back under control and shut down. Three years of your technical assistance, and we're clear."

McAllen's face reddened slowly. "I've considered hiring out, of course," he said. "Many times. I need the money very badly. But aren't you overlooking something?"

"What?"

"I went to considerable pains," said McAllen, "to establish myself as a lunatic. It was distasteful, but it seemed necessary to discourage anyone from making too close an investigation of some of my more recent lines of research. If it became known now that I was again in charge of a responsible project--"

Barney shook his head. "No problem, doctor. We'd be drawing on outside talent for help in specific matters--very easy to cover up any leads to you personally. I've handled that general sort of thing before."

McAllen frowned thoughtfully. "I see. But I'd have--There wouldn't be so much work that--"

"No," Barney said. "I guarantee that you'll have all the time you want for your own problem." He smiled. "Considering what you told me, I'd like to hear that one's been solved myself!"

McAllen grinned briefly. "I can imagine. Very well. Ah ... when can you let me have the money, Mr. Chard?"

The sun was setting beyond the little lake as Barney drew the shades over the cabin window again. Dr. McAllen was half inside the built-in closet at the moment, fitting a pair of toggle switches to the concealed return device in there.

"Here we go," he said suddenly.

Three feet from the wall of the room the shadowy suggestion of another wall, and of an open door, became visible.

Barney said dubiously, "We came out of that?"

McAllen looked at him, sad, "The appearance is different on the exit side. But the Tube's open now--Here, I'll show you."

He went up to the apparition of a door, abruptly seemed to melt into it. Barney held his breath, and followed. Again there was no sensory reaction to passing through the Tube. As his foot came down on something solid in the shadowiness into which he stepped, the living room in Sweetwater Beach sprang into sudden existence about him.

"Seems a little odd from that end, the first time through, doesn't it?" McAllen remarked.

Barney let out his breath.

"If I'd been the one who invented the Tube," he said honestly, "I'd never have had the nerve to try it."

McAllen grinned. "Tell you the truth, I did need a drink or two the first time. But it's dead-safe if you know just what you're doing."

Which was not, Barney felt, too reassuring. He looked back. The door through which they had come was the one by which they had left. But beyond it now lay a section of the entrance hall of the Sweetwater Beach house.

"Don't let that fool you," said McAllen, following his gaze. "If you tried to go out into the hall at the moment, you'd find yourself right back in the cabin. Light rays passing through the Tube can be shunted off and on. He went over to the door, closed and locked it, dropping the key in his pocket. "I keep it locked. I don't often have visitors, but if I had one while the door was open it could be embarrassing."

"What about the other end?" Barney asked. "The door appeared in the cabin when you turned those switches. What happens now? Suppose someone breaks into the cabin and starts prowling around--is the door still there?"

McAllen shook his head. "Not unless that someone happened to break in within the next half-minute. He
considered. "Let's put it this way. The Tube's permanently centered on its two exit points, but the effect ordinarily is
dissipated over half a mile of the neighborhood at the other end. For practical purposes there is no useful effect.
When I'm going to go through, I bring the exit end down to a focus point ... does that make sense? Very well. It
remains focused for around sixty or ninety seconds, depending on how I set it; then it expands again." He nodded at
the locked door. "In the cabin, that's disappeared by now. Walk through the space where it's been, and you'll notice
nothing unusual. Clear?"

Barney hesitated. "And if that door were still open here, and somebody attempted to step through after the exit
end had expanded--"

"Well," McAllen said, moving over to a wall buzzer and pressing it, "that's what I meant when I said it could be
embarrassing. He'd get expanded too--disastrously. Could you use a drink, Mr. Chard? I know I want one."

* * * * *

The drinks, served by Fredericks, were based on a rather rough grade of bourbon, but Barney welcomed them.
There was an almost sick fascination in what was a certainty now: he was going to get the Tube. That tremendous
device was his for the taking. He was well inside McAllen's guard; only carelessness could arouse the old man's
suspicions again, and Barney was not going to be careless. No need to hurry anything. He would play the reserved
role he had selected for himself, leave developments up to the fact that McAllen had carried the burden of his secret
for twelve years, with no more satisfactory confidant than Fredericks to trust with it. Having told Barney so much,
McAllen wanted to tell more. He would have needed very little encouragement to go on talking about it now.

Barney offered no encouragement. Instead, he gave McAllen a cautiously worded reminder that it was not
inconceivable they had an audience here, at which McAllen reluctantly subsided. There was, however, one fairly
important question Barney still wanted answered today. The nature of the answer would tell him the manner in
which McAllen should now be handled.

He waited until he was on his feet and ready to leave before presenting it. McAllen's plump cheeks were
flushed from the two highballs he had put away; in somewhat awkward phrases he had been expressing his gratitude
for Barney's generous help, and his relief that because of it the work on the Tube now could be brought to an end.

"Just one thing about that still bothers me a little, doctor," Barney said candidly.

McAllen looked concerned. "What's that, Mr. Chard?"

"Well ... you're in good health, I'd say." Barney smiled. "But suppose something did happen to you before you
succeeded in shutting the McAllen Tube down." He inclined his head toward the locked door.

"That thing would still be around waiting for somebody to open it and step through...."

McAllen's expression of concern vanished. He dug a forefinger cheerfully into Barney's ribs. "Young man, you
needn't worry. I've been aware of the possibility, of course, and believe me I'm keeping very careful notes and
instructions. Safe deposit boxes ... we'll talk about that tomorrow, eh? Somewhere else? Had a man in mind, as a
matter of fact, but we can make better arrangements now. You see, it's really so ridiculously easy at this stage."

Barney cleared his throat. "Some other physicist--?"

"Any capable physicist," McAllen said decidedly. "Just a matter, you see, of how reliable he is." He winked at
Barney. "Talk about that tomorrow too--or one of these days."

Barney stood looking down, with a kind of detached surprise, at a man who had just pronounced sentence of
death casually on himself, and on an old friend. For the first time in Barney's career, the question of deliberate
murder not only entered an operation, but had become in an instant an unavoidable part of it. Frank Elby, ambitious
and money-hungry, could take over where McAllen left off. Elby was highly capable, and Elby could be controlled.
McAllen could not. He could only be tricked; and, if necessary, killed.

It was necessary, of course. If McAllen lived until he knew how to shut the Tube down safely, he simply would
shut it down, destroy the device and his notes on it. A man who had gone to such extreme lengths to safeguard the
secret was not going to be talked out of his conviction that the McAllen Tube was a menace to the world. Fredericks,
the morose eavesdropper, had to be silenced with his employer to assure Barney of his undisputed possession of the
Tube.

Could he still let the thing go, let McAllen live? He couldn't, Barney decided. He'd dealt himself a hand in a
new game, and a big one--a fantastic, staggering game when one considered the possibilities in the Tube. It meant
new interest, it meant life for him. It wasn't in his nature to pull out. The part about McAllen was cold necessity. A
very ugly necessity, but McAllen--pleasantly burbling something as they walked down the short hall to the front
door--already seemed a little unreal, a roly-poly, muttering, fading small ghost.

In the doorway Barney exchanged a few words--he couldn't have repeated them an instant later--with the ghost,
became briefly aware of a remarkably firm hand clasp, and started down the cement walk to the street. Evening had
come to California at last; a few houses across the street made dim silhouettes against the hills, some of the windows
lit. He felt, Barney realized, curiously tired and depressed. A few steps behind him, he heard McAllen quietly
closing the door to his home. The walk, the garden, the street, the houses and hills beyond, vanished in a soundlessly violent explosion of white light around Barney Chard.

* * * * *

His eyes might have been open for several seconds before he became entirely aware of the fact. He was on his back looking up at the low raftered ceiling of a room. The light was artificial, subdued; it gave the impression of nighttime outdoors.

Memory suddenly blazed up. "Tricked!" came the first thought. Outsmarted. Outfoxed. And by--Then that went lost in a brief, intense burst of relief at the realization he was still alive, apparently unhurt. Barney turned sharply over on his side--bed underneath, he discovered--and stared around.

The room was low, wide. Something undefinably odd--He catalogued it quickly. Redwood walls, Navaho rugs on the floor, bookcases, unlit fireplace, chairs, table, desk with a typewriter and reading lamp. Across the room a tall dark grandfather clock with a bright metal disk instead of a clock-face stood against the wall. From it came a soft, low thudding as deliberate as the heart-beat of some big animal. It was the twin of one of the clocks he had seen in McAllen's living room.

The room was McAllen's, of course. Almost luxurious by comparison with his home, but wholly typical of the man. And now Barney became aware of its unusual feature; there were no windows. There was one door, so far to his right he had to twist his head around to see it. It stood half open; beyond it a few feet of a narrow passage lay within his range of vision, lighted in the same soft manner as the room. No sound came from there.

Had he been left alone? And what had happened? He wasn't in McAllen's home or in that fishing shack at the lake. The Tube might have picked him up--somehow--in front of McAllen's house, transported him to the Mallorca place. Or he might be in a locked hideaway McAllen had built beneath the Sweetwater Beach house.

Two things were unpleasantly obvious. His investigations hadn't revealed all of McAllen's secrets. And the old man hadn't really been fooled by Barney Chard's smooth approach. Not, at any rate, to the extent of deciding to trust him.

Hot chagrin at the manner in which McAllen had handed the role of dupe back to him flooded Barney for a moment. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. His coat had been hung neatly over the back of a chair a few feet away; his shoes stood next to the bed. Otherwise he was fully clothed. Nothing in the pockets of the coat appeared to have been touched; billfold, cigarette case, lighter, even the gun, were in place; the gun, almost startlingly, was still loaded. Barney thrust the revolver thoughtfully into his trousers pocket. His wrist watch seemed to be the only item missing.

He glanced about the room again, then at the half-open door and the stretch of narrow hallway beyond. McAllen must have noticed the gun. The fact that he hadn't bothered to take it away, of at least to unload it, might have been reassuring under different circumstances. Here, it could have a very disagreeable meaning. Barney went quietly to the door, stood listening a few seconds, became convinced there was no one within hearing range, and moved on down the hall.

In less than two minutes he returned to the room, with the first slow welling of panic inside him. He had found a bathroom, a small kitchen and pantry, a storage room twice as wide and long as the rest of the place combined, crammed with packaged and crated articles, and with an attached freezer. If it was mainly stored food, as Barney thought, and if there was adequate ventilation and independent power, as seemed to be the case, then McAllen had constructed a superbly self-sufficient hideout. A man might live comfortably enough for years without emerging from it.

There was only one thing wrong with the setup from Barney's point of view. The thing he'd been afraid of. Nowhere was there an indication of a window or of an exit door.

The McAllen Tube, of course, might make such ordinary conveniences unnecessary. And if the Tube was the only way in or out, then McAllen incidentally had provided himself with an escape-proof jail for anyone he preferred to keep confined. The place might very well have been built several hundred feet underground. A rather expensive proposition but, aside from that, quite feasible.

Barney felt his breath begin to quicken, and told himself to relax. Wherever he was, he shouldn't be here long. McAllen presently would be getting in contact with him. And then--

His glance touched the desk across the room, and now he noticed his missing wrist watch on it. He went over, picked it up, and discovered that the long white envelope on which the watch had been placed was addressed to him.

For a moment he stared at the envelope. Then, his fingers shaking a little, he tore open the envelope and pulled out the typewritten sheets within.

* * * * *

The letterhead, he saw without surprise, was OLIVER B. MCALLEN.
The letter read:

Dear Mr. Chard:

An unfortunate series of circumstances, combined with certain character traits in yourself, make it necessary to inconvenience you in a rather serious manner.

To explain: The information I gave you regarding the McAllen Tube and my own position was not entirely correct. It is not the intractable instrument I presented it as being--it can be "shut off" again quite readily and without any attendant difficulties. Further, the decision to conceal its existence was not reached by myself alone. For years we--that is, Mr. Fredericks, who holds a degree in engineering and was largely responsible for the actual construction of the Tube--and I, have been members of an association of which I cannot tell you too much. But I may say that it acts, among other things, as the present custodian of some of the more dangerous products of human science, and will continue to do so until a more stable period permits their safe release.

To keep developments such as the McAllen Tube out of irresponsible hands is no easy task these days, but a variety of effective devices are employed to that end. In this instance, you happened upon a "rigged" situation, which had been designed to draw action from another man, an intelligent and unscrupulous individual who lately had indicated a disturbing interest in events connected with the semipublic fiasco of my "matter transmitter" some years ago. The chances of another person becoming aware of the temporal incongruities which were being brought to this man's attention were regarded as so remote that they need be given no practical consideration. Nevertheless, the unexpected happened: you became interested. The promptness with which you acted on your chance observations shows a bold and imaginative manner of thinking on which you may be genuinely congratulated.

However, a perhaps less commendable motivation was also indicated. While I appeared to stall on coming to decisions you may have regarded as inevitable, your background was being investigated by the association. The investigation confirmed that you fall within a personality category of which we have the greatest reason to be wary.

Considering the extent of what you had surmised and learned, falsified though the picture was, this presented a serious problem. It was made more acute by the fact that the association is embarking on a "five-year-plan" of some importance. Publicity during this period would be more than ordinarily undesirable. It will therefore be necessary to see to it that you have no opportunity to tell what you know before the plan is concluded. I am sure you can see it would be most unwise to accept your simple word on the matter. Your freedom of movement and of communication must remain drastically restricted until this five-year period is over.

Within the next two weeks, as shown by the clock in your quarters, it will have become impossible for me or for any member of the association to contact you again before the day of your release. I tell you this so that you will not nourish vain hopes of changing the situation in your favor, but will adjust as rapidly as you can to the fact that you must spend the next five years by yourself. What ameliorations of this basic condition appeared possible have been provided.

It is likely that you will already have tried to find a way out of the cabin in which you were left. The manner of doing this will become apparent to you exactly twenty-four hours after I conclude and seal this letter. It seemed best to advise you of some details of your confinement before letting you discover that you have been given as much limited freedom as circumstances allowed.

Sincerely yours,

OLIVER B. MCALLEN

Barney dropped the letter on the desk, stared down at it, his mouth open. "Why, he's crazy!" he said aloud at last. "He's crazier than--" He straightened, looked uneasily about the room again.

Whether a maniac McAllen made a more desirable jailer than a secret association engaged in keeping dangerous scientific developments under cover could be considered an open question. The most hopeful thought was that McAllen was indulging an unsuspected and nasty sense of humor.

Unfortunately, there wasn't the slightest reason to believe it. McAllen was wise to him. The situation was no gag--and neither was it necessarily what McAllen wanted him to think. Unless his watch had been reset, he had been knocked out by whatever hit him for roughly five hours--or seventeen, he amended. But he would have been hungry if it had been the longer period; and he wasn't.

Five hours then. Five hours wouldn't have given them time to prepare the "cabin" as it was prepared: for someone's indefinite stay. At a guess, McAllen had constructed it as a secure personal retreat in the event of something like a nuclear holocaust. But, in that case, why vacate it now for Barney Chard?

Too many questions, he thought. Better just keep looking around.

* * * * *

The blank metal face on the grandfather clock swung back to reveal a group of four dials, each graduated in a different manner, only one of them immediately familiar. Barney studied the other three for some seconds, then their meaning suddenly came clear. The big clock had just finished softly talking away the fourth hour of the first day of
the first month of Year One. There were five figures on the Year Dial.

He stared at it. A five-year period of--something seemed to be the key to the entire setup.

Barney shook his head. Key it might be, but not one he could read without additional data. He snapped the cover disk shut on the unpleasantly suggestive dials, and began to go mentally over McAllen's letter.

The business that in twenty-four hours--twenty now--the manner of leaving the cabin would become "apparent" to him--that seemed to dispose of the possibility of being buried underground here. McAllen would hardly have provided him with a personal model of the Tube; he must be speaking of an ordinary door opening on the immediate environment, equipped with a time lock.

In that case, where was the door?

Barney made a second, far more careful search. Three hours later, he concluded it. He'd still found no trace of an exit. But the paneling in any of the rooms might slide aside to reveal one at the indicated time, or a section of the floor might swing back above a trap door. There was no point in attempting to press the search any further. After all, he only had to wait.

On the side, he'd made other discoveries. After opening a number of crates in the storage room, and checking contents of the freezer, he could assume that there was in fact more than enough food here to sustain one man for five years. Assuming the water supply held out--there was no way of checking on it; the source of the water like that of the power and the ventilation lay outside the area which was accessible to him--but if the water could be depended on, he wouldn't go hungry or thirsty. Even tobacco and liquor were present in comparably liberal quantities. The liquor he'd seen was all good; almost at random he had selected a bottle of cognac and brought it and a glass to the main room with him. The thought of food wasn't attractive at the moment. But he could use a drink.

He half filled the glass, emptied it with a few swallows, refilled it and took it over to one of the armchairs. He began to feel more relaxed almost at once. But the truth was, he acknowledged, settling back in the chair, that the situation was threatening to unnerve him completely. Everything he'd seen implied McAllen's letter came close to stating the facts; what wasn't said became more alarming by a suggestion of deliberate vagueness. Until that melodramatically camouflaged door was disclosed--seventeen hours from now--he'd be better off if he didn't try to ponder the thing out.

And the best way to do that might be to take a solid load on rapidly, and then sleep away as much of the intervening time as possible.

He wasn't ordinarily a hard drinker, but he'd started on the second bottle before the cabin began to blur on him. Afterwards, he didn't remember making it over to the bed.

** * * * * *

Barney woke up ravenous and without a trace of hangover. Making a mental adjustment to his surroundings took no more time than opening his eyes; he'd been dreaming Dr. McAllen had dropped him into a snake pit and was sadistically dangling a rope twelve feet above his head, inviting him to climb out. To find himself still in the softly lit cabin was--for a few seconds, at any rate--a relief.

The relief faded as he sat up and looked at his watch. Still over an hour to go before McAllen's idiotic door became "apparent." Barney swore and headed for the bathroom to freshen up.

There was an electric shaver there, the end of its cord vanishing into the wall. Barney used it as meticulously as if he were embarking on a day of normal activities, prepared a breakfast in the kitchen and took it to the main room. Heate unhurriedly, absorbed in his thoughts, now and then glancing about the room. After a few minutes he uneasily pushed back the plate and stood up. If McAllen's twenty-four hours began with the moment the big clock in the room had been started, the door should be in evidence by now.

Another tour of the place revealed nothing and left him nervous enough to start biting his nails. He moved about the room, looking over things he'd already investigated. A music cabinet--he'd thought it was a radio at first, but it was only an elaborate hi-fi record player; two enclosed racks of records went with it--mainly classical stuff apparently. And a narrow built-in closet with three polished fishing rods and related gear, which would have allowed for speculation on the nature of the cabin's surroundings, except that McAllen might feel compelled to have a sampling of his toys around him wherever he was. Barney closed the closet door morosely, stood regarding the two crowded bookcases next to it. Plenty of books--reflecting the McAllen taste again. Technical tomes. Great Literature. Dickens, Melville, the Life of Gandhi.

Barney grunted, and was turning away when another title caught his eye. He glanced back at it, hauled out the book:

"Fresh Water Game Fish; Tested Methods of Their Pursuit." The author: O. B. McAllen.

Barney was opening the book when the cabin's door also opened.

** * * * * *

Bright light--daylight--filled the room with so sudden a gush that Barney's breath caught in his throat. The book
seemed to leap out of his hands. With the same glance he saw then the low, wide picture window which abruptly had appeared in the opposite wall, occupying almost half its space—and, in the other wall on the far left, a big door which was still swinging slowly open into the room. Daylight poured in through window and door. And beyond them—

For seconds he stared at the scene outside, barely aware of what he was looking at, while his mind raced on. He had searched every inch of the walls. And those thick wooden panels hadn't simply slid aside; the surfaces of doorframe and window were flush with the adjoining wall sections. So the McAllen Tube was involved in these changes in the room—and he might have guessed, Barney thought, that McAllen would have found more than one manner of putting the space-twisting properties of his device to use. And then finally he realized what he was seeing through the window and beyond the door. He walked slowly up to the window, still breathing unevenly.

The scene was unfamiliar but not at all extraordinary. The cabin appeared to be part way up one side of a heavily forested, rather narrow valley. It couldn't be more than half a mile to the valley's far slope which rose very steeply, almost like a great cresting green wave, filling the entire window. Coming closer Barney saw the skyline above it, hazy, summery, brilliantly luminous. This cabin of McAllen's might be in one of the wilder sections of the Canadian Rockies.

Or—and this was a considerably less happy thought—it probably could have been set up just as well in some area like the Himalayas.

But a more immediate question was whether the cabin actually was in the valley or only appearing to be there. The use of the Tube made it possible that this room and its seeming surroundings were very far apart in fact. And just what would happen to him then if he decided to step outside?

There were scattered sounds beyond the open door: bird chirpings and whistles, and the continuous burring calls of what Barney decided would be a wild pigeon. Then a swirl of wind stirred the nearer branches. He could feel the wash of the breeze in the room.

It looked and sounded—and felt—all right.

Barney scowled undecidedly, clearing his throat, then discovered that a third item had appeared in the room along with the door and the window. In the wall just this side of the door at shoulder-height was a small ivory plate with two black switches on it. Presumably the controls for door and window....

Barney went over, gingerly touched the one on the right, watching the window; then flicked up the switch. Instantly, the window had vanished, the wood paneling again covered the wall. Barney turned the switch down. The window was back.

The door refused to disappear until he pushed it shut. Then it obeyed its switch with the same promptness.

He went back across the room, returned with one of McAllen's fishing poles, and edged its tip tentatively out through the door. He wouldn't have been surprised if the tip had disintegrated in that instant. But nothing at all occurred. He dug about with the pole in the loose earth beyond the doorsill, then drew it back. The breeze was flowing freely past him; a few grains of soil blew over the sill and into the room. The door seemed to be concealing no grisly tricks and looked to be safe enough.

Barney stepped out on the sill, moved on a few hesitant steps, stood looking about. He had a better view of the valley here—and the better view told him immediately that he was not in the Canadian Rockies. At least, Canada, to his knowledge, had no desert. And, on the left, this valley came to an end perhaps a little more than a mile away from the cabin, its wooded slopes flowing steeply down to a landscape which was dull rust-red--flat sand stretches alternating with worn rock escarpments, until the desert's rim rose toward and touched the hazy white sky. Not so very different from--

Barney's eyes widened suddenly. Could he be in the Sierras--perhaps not more than three or four hours' drive from Los Angeles?

Three or four hours' drive if he'd had a car, or course. But even so--

He stared around, puzzled. There were no signs of a human being, of human habitation. But somebody else must be here. Somebody to keep guard on him. Otherwise there was nothing to stop him from walking away from this place—though it might very well be a long, uncomfortable hike to any civilized spot.

Even if this did turn out to be the Himalayas, or some equally remote area, there must be hill tribes about if one went far enough—there should even be an occasional airplane passing overhead.

Barney stood just outside the door, frowning, pondering the situation again, searching for the catch in it. McAllen and his friends, whatever else they might be, weren't stupid. There was something involved here that he hadn't become aware of yet.

Almost without thought then, he turned up his head, squinting at the bright hazy sky above him--

And saw IT.

His breath sucked in and burst from his lungs in a half-strangled, terrified squawk as he staggered backward
into the cabin, slammed the door shut, then spun around and began slapping frantically at the switches on the wall-
plate until door and window were gone, and only the cabin's soft illumination was around him again. Then he
crouched on the floor, his back against the wall, shaking with a terror he could hardly have imagined before.

He knew what the catch was now. He had understood it completely in the instant of glancing up and seeing that
tiny brilliant blue-white point of light glare down at him through the incandescent cloud layers above. Like a
blazing, incredibly horrible insect eye....

This world's sun.

THE END OF YEAR ONE

Barney Chard came up out of an uneasy sleep to the sudden sharp awareness that something was wrong. For
some seconds he lay staring about the unlit cabin, mouth dry, heart hammering with apprehension. Then he
discovered it was only that he had left the exit door open and the window switched on.... Only? This was the first
time since they had left him here that he had gone to sleep without sealing the cabin first—even when blind drunk,
really embalmed.

He thought of climbing out of bed and taking care of it now, but decided to let the thing ride. After all he knew
there was nothing in the valley--nothing, in fact, on this world--of which he had a realistic reason to be afraid. And
he felt dead tired. Weak and sick. Feeling like that no longer alarmed him as it had done at first; it was a simple
physical fact. The sheet under him was wet with sweat, though it was no more than comfortably warm in the room.
The cabin never became more than comfortably warm. Barney lay back again, trying to figure out how it had
happened he had forgotten about the window and the door.

It had been night for quite a while when he went to sleep, but regardless of how long he'd slept, it was going to
go on being night a good deal longer. The last time he had bothered to check--which, Barney decided on reflection,
might be several months ago now--the sunless period had continued for better than fifty-six hours. Not long before
dropping on the bed, he was standing in front of the big clock while the minute hand on the hour dial slid up to the
point which marked the end of the first year in Earth time he had spent in the cabin. Watching it happen, he was
suddenly overwhelmed again by the enormity of his solitude, and it looked as if it were going to turn into another of
those periods when he sat with the gun in his hand, sobbing and swearing in a violent muddle of self-pity and
helpless fury. He decided to knock off the lamenting and get good and drunk instead. And he would make it a drunk
to top all drunks on this happy anniversary night.

But he hadn't done that either. He had everything set up, downright festively--glasses, crushed ice, a formidable
little squad of fresh bottles. But when he looked at the array, he suddenly felt sick in advance. Then there was a
wave of leaden heaviness, of complete fatigue. He hadn't had time to think of sealing the cabin. He had simply fallen
into the bed then and there, and for all practical purposes passed out on the spot.

Barney Chard lay wondering about that. It had been, one might say, a rough year. Through the long days in
particular, he had been doing his level best to obliterate his surroundings behind sustained fogs of alcoholism. The
thought of the hellishly brilliant far-off star around which this world circled, the awareness that only the roof and
walls of the cabin were between himself and that blazing alien watcher, seemed entirely unbearable. The nights,
after a while, were easier to take. They had their strangeness too, but the difference wasn't so great. He grew
accustomed to the big green moon, and developed almost an affection for a smaller one, which was butter-yellow
and on an orbit that made it a comparatively infrequent visitor in the sky over the valley. By night he began to leave
the view window in operation and finally even the door open for hours at a time. But he had never done it before
when he wanted to go to sleep.

Alcoholism, Barney decided, stirring uneasily on the sweat-soiled, wrinkled sheet, hadn't been much of a
success. His body, or perhaps some resistant factor in his mind, let him go so far and no farther. When he exceeded
the limit, he became suddenly and violently ill. And remembering the drunk periods wasn't pleasant. Barney Chard,
that steel-tough lad, breaking up, going to pieces, did not make a pretty picture. It was when he couldn't keep that
picture from his mind that he most frequently had sat there with the gun, turning it slowly around in his hand. It had
been a rather close thing at times.

Perhaps he simply hated McAllen and the association too much to use the gun. Drunk or sober, he brooded
endlessly over methods of destroying them. He had to be alive when they came back. Some while ago there had
been a space of several days when he was hallucinating the event, when McAllen and the association seemed to be
present, and he was arguing with them, threatening them, even pleading with them. He came out of that period
deeply frightened by what he was doing. Since then he hadn't been drinking as heavily.

But this was the first time he'd gone to sleep without drinking at all.

* * * * *

He sat up on the edge of the bed, found himself shaking a little again after that minor effort, but climbed to his
feet anyway, and walked unsteadily over to the door. He stood there looking out. The cloud layers always faded
away during the night, gathered again at dawn. By now the sky was almost clear. A green glow over the desert to the
left meant the larger moon was just below the horizon. The little yellow moon rode high in the sky above it. If they
came up together, this would be the very bright part of the night during which the birds and other animal life in the
valley went about their pursuits as if it were daytime. He could hear bird-chirpings now against the restless mutter of
the little stream which came down the center of the valley, starting at the lake at the right end and running out into
stagnant and drying pools a short distance after it entered the desert.

He discovered suddenly he had brought the gun along from the bed with him and was holding it without having
been in the least aware of the fact. Grinning twistedly at the old and pointless precaution, he shoved the gun into his
trousers pocket, brought out matches, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and began to smoke. Very considerate of them
to see to it he wouldn't run out of minor conveniences … like leaving him liquor enough to drink himself to death on
any time he felt like it during these five years.

Like leaving him the gun--

From the association's standpoint those things were up to him, of course, Barney thought bitterly. In either
unfortunate event, he wouldn't be on their consciences.

He felt a momentary spasm of the old hate, but a feeble one, hardly more than a brief wash of the early torrents
of rage. Something had burned out of him these months; an increasing dullness was moving into its place--

And just what, he thought, startled, was he doing outside the cabin door now? He hadn't consciously decided to
go that far; it must have been months, actually, since he had walked beyond the doorway at all. During the first few
weeks he had made half a dozen attempts to explore his surroundings by night, and learned quickly that he was
confined to as much of the valley as he could see from the cabin. Beyond the ridges lay naked desert and naked
mountain ranges, silent and terrifying in the moonlight.

Barney glanced up and down the valley, undecided but not knowing quite what he was undecided about. He
didn't feel like going back into the cabin, and to just stand here was boring.

"Well," he said aloud, sardonically, "it's a nice night for a walk, Brother Chard."

Well, why not? It was bright enough to see by now if he kept away from the thickest growths of trees, and
getting steadily brighter as the big moon moved up behind the distant desert rim. He'd walk till he got tired, then
rest. By the time he got back to the cabin he'd be ready to lie down and sleep off the curious mood that had taken
hold of him.

Barney started off up the valley, stepping carefully and uncertainly along the sloping, uneven ground.

* * * * *

During the early weeks he had found a thick loose-leaf binder in the back of one of the desk drawers. He
thought it might have been left there intentionally. Its heading was NOTES ON THE TERRESTRIAL
ECOLOGICAL BASE OF THE EIGHTEENTH SYSTEM, VOLUME III. After leafing through them once, it had
been a while before Barney could bring himself to study the notes in more detail. He didn't, at that time, want to
know too much about the situation he was in. He was still numbed by it.

But eventually he went over the binder carefully. The various reports were unsigned, but appeared to have been
compiled by at least four or five persons--McAllen among them; his writing style was not difficult to recognize.
Leaving out much that was incomprehensible or nearly so, Barney could still construe a fairly specific picture of the
association project of which he was now an unscheduled and unwilling part. Selected plants and animals had been
moved from Earth through the McAllen Tube to a world consisting of sand, rock and water, without detected traces
of indigenous life in any form. At present the Ecological Base was only in its ninth year, which meant that the larger
trees in the valley had been nearly full-grown when brought here with the soil that was to nourish them. From any
viewpoint, the planting of an oasis of life on the barren world had been a gigantic undertaking, but there were
numerous indications that the McAllen Tube was only one of the array of improbable devices the association had at
its disposal for such tasks. A few cryptic paragraphs expressed the writer's satisfaction with the undetailed methods
by which the Base's localized climatic conditions were maintained.

So far even the equipment which kept the cabin in uninterrupted operation had eluded Barney's search. It and
the other required machinery might be buried somewhere in the valley. Or it might, he thought, have been set up just
as easily some distance away, in the desert or among the remotely towering mountain ranges. One thing he had
learned from the binder was that McAllen had told the truth in saying no one could contact him from Earth before
the full period of his exile was over. The reason had seemed appalling enough in itself. This world had moved to a
point in its orbit where the radiance of its distant sun was thickening between it and Earth, growing too intense to be
penetrated by the forces of the McAllen Tube. Another four years would pass before the planet and the valley
emerged gradually from behind that barrier again.

* * * * *

He walked, rested, walked again. Now and then he was troubled by a burst of violent sweating, followed by
shivering fits until his clothes began to dry again. The big moon edged presently over the ridge above him, and in
the first flood of its light the opposite slope of the valley took on the appearance of a fanciful sub-oceanic reef. The
activity of the animal life about Barney increased promptly. It was no darker now than an evening hour on Earth,
and his fellow occupants of the Ecological Base seemed well-adjusted to the strange shifts of day and night to which
they had been consigned.

He pushed through a final thicket of shrubbery, and found himself at the edge of the lake. Beyond the almost
circular body of water, a towering wall of cliffs sealed the upper end of the valley. He had come almost a mile, and
while a mile--a city mile, at least--wouldn't have meant much to Barney Chard at one time, he felt quite exhausted
now. He sat down at the edge of the water, and, after a minute or two, bent forward and drank from it. It had the
same cold, clear flavor as the water in the cabin.

The surface of the water was unquiet. Soft-flying large insects of some kind were swarming about, stippling the
nearby stretch of the lake with their touch, and there were frequent swift swirls as fish rose from beneath to take
down the flyers. Presently one of them broke clear into the air--a big fish, thick-bodied and shining, looking as long
as Barney's arm in the moonlight--and dropped back with a splash. Barney grinned twistedly. The NOTES indicated
Dr. McAllen had taken some part in stocking the valley, and one could trust McAllen to see to it that the presence of
his beloved game fish wasn't overlooked even in so outlandish a project.

He shifted position, became aware of the revolver in his pocket and brought it out. A wave of dull anger surged
slowly through him again. What they did with trees and animals was their own business. But what they had done to
a human being....

He scrambled suddenly to his feet, drew his arm back, and sent the gun flying far out over the lake. It spun
through the moonlight, dipped, struck the surface with less of a splash than the fish had made, and was gone.

Now why, Barney asked himself in amazement, did I do that? He considered it a moment, and then, for the first
time in over a year, felt a brief touch of something not far from elation.

He wasn't going to die here. No matter how politely the various invitations to do himself in had been extended
by McAllen or the association, he was going to embarrass them by being alive and healthy when they came back to
the valley four years from now. They wouldn't kill him then; they'd already shown they didn't have the guts to
commit murder directly. They would have to take him back to Earth.

And once he was there, it was going to be too bad for them. It didn't matter how closely they watched him; in
the end he would find or make the opportunity to expose them, pull down the whole lousy, conceited crew, see them
buried under the shambles an outraged world would make of the secret association....

THE END OF YEAR TWO

The end of Year Two on the Ecological Base in the Eighteenth System arrived and went by without Barney's
being immediately aware of the fact. Some two hours later, he glanced at his wrist watch, pushed back the chair, got
up from the desk and went over to the big grandfather clock to confirm his surmise.

"Well, well, Brother Chard," he said aloud. "Another anniversary ... and three of them to go. We're almost at
the halfway mark--"

He snapped the cover plate back over the multiple clock faces, and turned away. Three more years on the
Ecological Base was a gruesome stretch of time when you thought of it as a whole....

Which was precisely why he rarely let himself think of it as a whole nowadays.

This last year, at any rate, Barney conceded to himself, had to be regarded as an improvement on the first. Well,
he added irritably, and what wouldn't be? It hadn't been delightful, he'd frequently felt almost stupefied with
boredom. But physically, at least, he was fit--considerably fitter, as a matter of fact, than he'd ever been in his life.

Not very surprising. When he got too restless to be able to settle down to anything else, he was walking about
the valley, moving along at his best clip regardless of obstacles until he was ready to drop to the ground wherever he
was. Exertion ate up restlessness eventually--for a while. Selecting another tree to chop into firewood took the edge
off the spasms of rage that tended to come up if he started thinking too long about that association of jerks
somewhere beyond the sun. Brother Chard was putting on muscle all over. And after convincing himself at last--
after all, the animals weren't getting hurt--that the glaring diamond of fire in the daytime sky couldn't really be
harmful, he had also rapidly put on a Palm Beach tan. When his carefully rationed sleep periods eventually came
around, he was more than ready for them, and slept like a log.

Otherwise: projects. Projects to beat boredom, and never mind how much sense they made in themselves. None
of them did. But after the first month or two he had so much going that there was no question any more of not
having something to do. Two hours allotted to work out on the typewriter a critical evaluation of a chapter from one
of McAllen's abstruse technical texts. If Barney's mood was sufficiently sour, the evaluation would be unprintable;
but it wasn't being printed, and two hours had been disposed of. A day and a half--Earth Standard Time--to construct
an operating dam across the stream. He was turning into an experienced landscape architect; the swimming pool in
the floor of the valley beneath the cabin might not have been approved by Carstairs of California, but it was the one project out of which he had even drawn some realistic benefit.

Then:

Half an hour to improve his knife-throwing technique.
Fifteen minutes to get the blade of the kitchen knife straightened out afterwards.
Two hours to design a box trap for the capture of one of the fat gray squirrels that always hung about the cabin.
Fifty minutes on a new chess problem. Chess, Barney had discovered, wasn't as hairy as it looked.
Five hours to devise one more completely foolproof method of bringing about the eventual ruin of the association. That made no more practical sense than anything else he was doing--and couldn't, until he knew a great deal more about McAllen's friends than he did now.

But it was considerably more absorbing, say, than even chess.
Brother Chard could beat boredom. He could probably beat another three years of boredom.
He hadn't forgiven anyone for making him do it.

THE END OF YEAR FIVE

For some hours, the association's Altiplano station had been dark and almost deserted. Only the IMT transit lock beneath one of the sprawling ranch houses showed in the vague light spreading out of the big scanning plate in an upper wall section. The plate framed an unimpressive section of the galaxy, a blurred scattering of stars condensing toward the right, and, somewhat left of center, a large misty red globe.

John Emanuel Fredericks, seated by himself in one of the two Tube operator chairs, ignored the plate. He was stooped slightly forwards, peering absorbedly through the eyepieces of the operator scanner before him.

Melvin Simms, Psychologist, strolled in presently through the transit lock's door, stopped behind Fredericks, remarked mildly, "Good evening, doctor."

Fredericks started and looked around. "Never heard you arrive, Mel. Where's Ollie?"

"He and Spalding dropped in at Spalding's place in Vermont. They should be along in a few minutes."

"Spalding?" Fredericks repeated inquiringly. "Our revered president intends to observe the results of Ollie's experiment in person?"

"He'll represent the board here," Simms said. "Whereas I, as you may have guessed, represent the outraged psychology department." He nodded at the plate. "That the place?"

"That's it. ET Base Eighteen."

"Not very sharp in the Tube, is it?"

"No. Still plenty of interfering radiation. But it's thinned out enough for contact. Reading 0.19, as of thirty minutes ago." Fredericks indicated the chair beside him. "Sit down if you want a better look."

"Thanks." The psychologist settled himself in the chair, leaned forward and peered into the scanner. After a few seconds he remarked, "Not the most hospitable-looking place--"

Fredericks grunted. "Any of the ecologists will tell you Eighteen's an unspoiled beauty. No problems there--except the ones we bring along ourselves."

Simms grinned faintly. "Well, we're good at doing that, aren't we? Have you looked around for uh ... for McAllen's subject yet?"

"No. Felt Ollie should be present when we find out what's happened. Incidentally, how did the meeting go?"

"You weren't tuned in?" Simms asked, surprised.

"No. Too busy setting things up for contact."

"Well"--Simms sat back in his chair--"I may say it was a regular bear garden for a while, doctor. Psychology expressed itself as being astounded, indignant, offended. In a word, they were hopping mad. I kept out of it, though I admit I was startled when McAllen informed me privately this morning of the five-year project he's been conducting on the quiet. He was accused of crimes ranging ... oh, from the clandestine to the inhumane. And, of course, Ollie was giving it back as good as he got."

"Of course."

"His arguments," Simms went on, pursing his lips reflectively, "were not without merit. That was recognized. Nobody enjoys the idea of euthanasia as a security device. Many of us feel--I do--that it's still preferable to the degree of brain-washing required to produce significant alterations in a personality type of Chard's class."

"Ollie feels that, too," Fredericks said. "The upshot of the original situation, as he saw it, was that Barney Chard had been a dead man from the moment he got on the association's trail. Or a permanently deformed personality."

Simms shook his head. "Not the last. We wouldn't have considered attempting personality alteration in his case."

"Euthanasia then," Fredericks said. "Chard was too intelligent to be thrown off the track, much too
unchurpulous to be trusted under any circumstances. So Ollie reported him dead."

* * * * *

The psychologist was silent for some seconds. "The point might be this," he said suddenly. "After my talk with McAllen this morning, I ran an extrapolation on the personality pattern defined for Chard five years ago on the basis of his background. Results indicate he went insane and suicided within a year."

"How reliable are those results?" Fredericks inquired absently.

"No more so than any other indication in individual psychology. But they present a reasonable probability ... and not a very pleasant one."

Fredericks said, "Oliver wasn't unaware of that as a possible outcome. One reason he selected Base Eighteen for the experiment was to make sure he couldn't interfere with the process, once it had begun."

"His feeling, after talking with Chard for some hours, was that Chard was an overcondensed man. That is Oliver's own term, you understand. Chard obviously was intelligent, had a very strong survival drive. He had selected a good personal survival line to follow--good but very narrow. Actually, of course, he was a frightened man. He had been running scared all his life. He couldn't stop."

Simms nodded.

"Base Eighteen stopped him. The things he'd been running from simply no longer existed. Ollie believed Chard would go into a panic when he realized it. The question was what he'd do then. Survival now had a very different aspect. The only dangers threatening him were the ones inherent in the rigid personality structure he had maintained throughout his adult existence. Would he be intelligent enough to understand that? And would his survival urge--with every alternative absolutely barred to him for five years--be strong enough to overcome those dangers?"

"And there," Simms said dryly, "we have two rather large questions." He cleared his throat. "The fact remains, however, that Oliver B. McAllen is a good practical psychologist--as he demonstrated at the meeting."

"I expected Ollie would score on the motions," Fredericks said. "How did that part of it come off?"

"Not too badly. The first motion was passed unanimously. A vote of censure against Dr. McAllen."

Fredericks looked thoughtful. "His seventeenth--I believe?"

"Yes. The fact was mentioned. McAllen admitted he could do no less than vote for this one himself. However, the next motion to receive a majority was, in effect, a generalized agreement that men with such ... ah ... highly specialized skills as Barney Chard's and with comparable intelligence actually would be of great value as members of the association, if it turned out that they could be sufficiently relieved of their more flagrant antisocial tendencies. Considering the qualification, the psychology department could hardly avoid backing that motion. The same with the third one--in effect again that Psychology is to make an unprejudiced study of the results of Dr. McAllen's experiment on Base Eighteen, and report on the desirability of similar experiments when the personality of future subjects appears to warrant them."

"Well," Fredericks said, after a pause, "as far as the association goes, Ollie got what he wanted. As usual." He hesitated. "The other matter--"

"We'll know that shortly." Simms turned his head to listen, added in a lowered voice, "They're coming now."

* * * * *

Dr. Stephen Spalding said to Simms and Fredericks: "Dr. McAllen agrees with me that the man we shall be looking for on Base Eighteen may be dead. If this is indicated, we'll attempt to find some evidence of his death before normal ecological operations on Eighteen are resumed.

"Next, we may find him alive but no longer sane. Dr. Simms and I are both equipped with drug-guns which will then be used to render him insensible. The charge is sufficient to insure he will not wake up again. In this circumstance, caution will be required since he was left on the Base with a loaded gun."

"Third, he may be alive and technically sane, but openly or covertly hostile to us." Spalding glanced briefly at each of the others, then went on, "It is because of this particular possibility that our contact group here has been very carefully selected. If such has been the result of Dr. McAllen's experiment, it will be our disagreeable duty to act as Chard's executioners. To add lifelong confinement or further psychological manipulation to the five solitary years Chard already has spent would be inexcusable."

"Dr. McAllen has told us he did not inform Chard of the actual reason he was being marooned--"

"On the very good grounds," McAllen interrupted, "that if Chard had been told at the outset what the purpose was, he would have preferred killing himself to allowing the purpose to be achieved. Any other human being was Chard's antagonist. It would have been impossible for him to comply with another man's announced intentions."

Simms nodded. "I'll go along on that point, doctor."

Spalding resumed, "It might be a rather immaterial point by now. In any event, Chard's information was that an important 'five-year-plan' of the association made it necessary to restrict him for that length of time. We shall observe him closely. If the indications are that he would act against the association whenever he is given the
opportunity, our line will be that the five-year-plan has been concluded, and that he is, therefore, now to be released and will receive adequate compensation for his enforced seclusion. As soon as he is asleep, he will, of course, receive euthanasia. But up to that time, everything must be done to reassure him."

He paused again, concluded, "There is the final possibility that Dr. McAllen's action has had the results he was attempting to bring about... Ollie, you might speak on that yourself."

McAllen shrugged. "I've already presented my views. Essentially, it's a question of whether Barney Chard was capable of learning that he could live without competing destructively with other human beings. If he has grasped that, he should also be aware by now that Base Eighteen is presently one of the most interesting spots in the known universe."

Simms asked: "Do you expect he'll be grateful for what has occurred?"

"We-e-ll," McAllen said judiciously, turning a little pale, "that, of course, depends on whether he is still alive and sane: But if he has survived the five years, I do believe that he will not be dissatisfied with what has happened to him. However"--he shrugged again--"let's get ahead with it. Five years has been a long time to find out whether or not I've murdered a man."

In the momentary silence that followed, he settled himself in the chair Fredericks had vacated, and glanced over at Simms. "You stay seated, Mel," he said. "You represent Psychology here. Use your chair scanner. The plate's still showing no indications of clearing, John?"

"No," said Fredericks. "In another two hours we might have a good picture there. Hardly before."

McAllen said, "We won't wait for it. Simms and I can determine through the scanners approximately what has been going on. He was silent a few seconds; then the blurred red globe in the plate expanded swiftly, filled two thirds of the view space, checked for a moment, then grew once more; finally stopped.

McAllen said irritably, "John, I'm afraid you'll have to take over. My hands don't seem steady enough to handle this properly." * * * * *

A minute or two passed. The big plate grew increasingly indistinct, all details lost in a muddy wash of orange-brown shades. Green intruded suddenly; then McAllen muttered, "Picking up the cabin now."

There was a moment of silence, then Fredericks cleared his throat. "So far so good, Oliver. We're looking into the cabin. Can't see your man yet--but someone's living here. Eh, Simms?"

"Obviously," the psychologist acknowledged. He hesitated. "And at a guess it's no maniac. The place is in reasonably good order."

"You say Chard isn't in the cabin?" Spalding demanded.

Fredericks said, "Not unless he's deliberately concealing himself. The exit door is open. Hm-m-m. Well, the place isn't entirely deserted, after all."

"What do you mean?" asked Spalding.

"Couple of squirrels sitting in the window," Simms explained.

"In the window? Inside the cabin?"

"Yes," said Fredericks. "Either they strayed in while he was gone, or he's keeping them as pets. Now, should we start looking around outside for Chard?"

"No," Spalding decided. "The Base is too big to attempt to cover at pin-point focus. If he's living in the cabin and has simply gone out, he'll return within a few hours at the most. We'll wait and see what we can deduce from the way he behaves when he shows up." He turned to McAllen. "Ollie," he said, "I think you might allow yourself to relax just a little. This doesn't seem at all bad!"

McAllen grunted. "I don't know," he said. "You're overlooking one thing."

"What's that?"

"I told Chard when to expect us. Unless he's smashed the clock, he knows we're due today. If nothing's wrong--wouldn't he be waiting in the cabin for us?"

Spalding hesitated. "That is a point. He seems to be hiding out. May have prepared an ambush, for that matter. John--"

"Yes?" Fredericks said.

"Step the tubescope down as fine as it will go, and scan that cabin as if you were vacuuming it. There may be some indication--"

"He's already doing that," Simms interrupted.

There was silence again for almost two minutes. Forefinger and thumb of Fredericks' right hand moved with infinite care on a set of dials on the side of the scanner; otherwise neither he nor Simms stirred.

"Oh-hoo-hoo-HAW!" Dr. John Fredericks cried suddenly. "Oh-hoo-hoo-HAW! A message, Ollie! Your Mr. Chard has left you a ... hoo-hoo ... message."
For a moment McAllen couldn't see clearly through the scanner. Fredericks was still laughing; Simms was saying in a rapid voice, "It's quite all right, doctor! Quite all right. Your man's sane, quite sane. In fact you've made, one might guess, a one hundred per cent convert to the McAllen approach to life. Can't you see it?"

"No," gasped McAllen. He had a vague impression of the top of the desk in the main room of the cabin, of something white—a white card—taped to it, of blurred printing on the card. "Nothing's getting that boy unduly excited any more," Simms' voice went on beside him. "Not even the prospect of seeing visitors from Earth for the first time in five years. But he's letting you know it's perfectly all right to make yourself at home in his cabin until he gets back. Here, let me—"

He reached past McAllen, adjusted the scanner. The printing on the card swam suddenly into focus before McAllen's eyes.

The message was terse, self-explanatory, to the point:

GONE FISHING,
Regards,
B. Chard.
THE END
"You are General James Rothwell?"
Rothwell sighed. "Yes, Commander Aku. We have met several times."
"Ah, yes. I recognize your insignia. Humans are so alike." The alien strode importantly across the office, the resilient pads of his broad feet making little plopping sounds on the rug, and seated himself abruptly in the visitor's chair beside Rothwell's desk. He gave a sharp cry, and another alien, shorter, but sporting similar, golden fur, stepped into the office and closed the door. Both wore simple, brown uniforms, without ornamentation.
"I am here," Aku said, "to tell you something." He stared impassively at Rothwell for a minute, his fur-covered, almost human face completely expressionless, then his gaze shifted to the window, to the hot runways of New York International Airport and to the immense gray spaceship that, even from the center of the field, loomed above the hangars and passenger buildings. For an instant, a quick, unguessable emotion clouded the wide black eyes and tightened the thin lips, then it was gone.
Rothwell waited.
"General, Earth's children must all be aboard my ships within one week. We will start to load on the sixth day, next Thursday." He stood.
Rothwell locked eyes with the alien, and leaned forward, grinding his knuckles into the desk top. "You know that's impossible. We can't select 100,000 children from every country and assemble them in only six days."
"You will do it." The alien turned to leave.
"Commander Aku! Let me remind you ..."
Aku spun around, eyes flashing. "General Rothwell! Let me remind you that two weeks ago I didn't even know Earth existed, and since accidentally happening across your sun system and learning of your trouble I have had my entire trading fleet of a hundred ships in orbit about this planet while all your multitudinous political subdivisions have filled the air with talk and wrangle.
"I am sorry for Earth, but my allegiance is to my fleet and I cannot remain longer than seven more days and risk being caught up in your destruction. Now, either you accept my offer to evacuate as many humans as my ships will carry, or you don't." He paused. "You are the planet's evacuation coordinator; you will give me an answer."

Rothwell's arms sagged, he sunk back down into his chair, all pretense gone. Slowly he swung around to face the window and the gray ship, standing like a Gargantuan sundial counting the last days of Earth. He almost whispered. "We are choosing the children. They will be ready in six days."
He heard the door open and close. He was alone.
Five years ago, he thought, we cracked the secret of faster-than-light travel, and since then we've built about three dozen exploration ships and sent them out among the stars to see what they could see.
He stared blankly at the palms of his hand. I wonder what it was we expected to find?
We found that the galaxy was big, that there were a lot of stars, not so many planets, and practically no other life--at least no intelligence to compare with ours. Then ... He jabbed a button on his intercom.
"Ed Philips here. What is it Jim?"
"Doc, are you sure your boys have hypo'd, couched, and hypno'd the Leo crew with everything you've got?"
The voice on the intercom sighed. "Jim, those guys haven't got a memory of their own. We know everything about each one of them, from the hurts he got falling off tricycles to the feel of the first girl he kissed. Those men aren't lying, Jim."
"I never thought they were lying, Doc." Rothwell paused for a minute and studied the long yellow hairs that grew sparsely across the back of his hand, thickened to a dense grove at his wrist, and vanished under the sleeve of his uniform. He looked back at the intercom. "Doc, all I know is that three perfectly normal guys got on board that ship, and when it came back we found a lot of jammed instruments and three men terrified almost to the point of insanity."
"Jim, if you'd seen ..."
Rothwell interrupted. "I know. Five radioactive planets with the fresh scars of cobalt bombs and the remains of civilizations. Then radar screens erupting crazily with signals from a multi-thousand ship space fleet; vector computers hurriedly plotting and re-plotting the fast-moving trajectory, submitting each time an unvarying answer for the fleet's destination--our own solar system." He slapped his hand flat against the desk. "The point is, Doc, it's
not much to go on, and we don't dare send another ship to check for fear of attracting attention to ourselves. If we could only be sure."

"Jim," over the intercom, Philips' voice seemed to waver slightly, "those men honestly saw what they say. I'd stake my life on it."

"All of us are, Doc." He flipped the off button. Just thirty days now, since the scout ship Leo's discovery and the panicked dash for home with the warning. Not that the warning was worth much, he reflected, Earth had no space battle fleet. There had never been any reason to build one.

Then, two weeks ago, Aku's trading fleet had descended from nowhere, having blundered, he said, across Earth's orbit while on a new route between two distant star clusters. When told of the impending attack, Aku immediately offered to cancel his trip and evacuate as many humans as his ships could hold, so that humanity would at least survive, somewhere in the galaxy. Earth chose to accept his offer.

"Hobson's choice," Rothwell growled to himself. "No choice at all." After years of handling hot and cold local wars and crises of every description, his military mind had become conditioned to a complete disbelief in fortuitous coincidence, and he gagged at the thought of Aku "just happening by." Still frowning, he punched a yellow button on his desk, and reviewed in his mind the things he wanted to say.

* * * * *

"Jim! Isn't everything all right?"

Chagrined, Rothwell scrambled to his feet, the President had never answered so quickly before. He faced the screen on the wall to his right and saluted, amazed once again at how old the man looked. Sparse white hair criss-crossed haphazardly over the President's head, his face was lined with deep trenches that not even the most charitable could call wrinkles, and the faded eyes that stared from deep caverns no longer radiated the flaming vitality that had inspired victorious armies in the African war.

"Commander Aku was just here, sir. He demands that the children be ready for evacuation next Thursday. I told him that it would be damned difficult."

The face on the screen paled perceptibly. "I hope you didn't anger the commander!"

Rothwell ground his teeth. "I told him we'd deliver the goods on Thursday."

Presidential lips tightened. "I don't care for the way you said that, General."

Rothwell straightened. "I apologize, sir. It's just that this whole lousy setup has me worried silly. I don't like Aku making like a guardian angel and us having no choice but to dance to his harp." His fingers clenched. "God knows we need his help, and I guess its wrong to ask too many questions, but how come he's only landed one of his ships, and why is it that he and his lieutenant are the only aliens to leave that ship--the only aliens we've ever even seen? It just doesn't figure out!" There, he thought, I've said it.

"I don't know," he said. "But Aku's got us in a hell of a spot." Rothwell winced at the shake in the old man's voice.

"Uh, Jim. You haven't said this in public, have you?"

Rothwell snorted. "No, sir, I don't care for a panic." "There, there, Jim." The President smiled weakly. "We can't expect the aliens to act like we do, can we?" He began to adopt the preacher tone he used so effectively in his campaign speeches. "We must be thankful for the chance breeze that wafted Commander Aku to these shores, and for his help. Maybe the war fleet won't arrive after all and everything will turn out all right. You're doing a fine job, Jim." The screen went blank.

* * * * *

Rothwell felt sick. He felt sorry for the President, but sorrier for the Western Democratic Union, to be captured by such a feeble thing. Leaning back in his chair, he glared at the empty screen. "You can't solve problems by wishing them away. You knew that once."

His mind wandered, and for a minute he thought he could actually feel the growing pressure of three billion people waiting for the computers of Moscow Central to make their impartial choice from the world's children. Trained mathematicians, the best that could be mustered from every major country, monitored each phase of the project to insure its absolute honesty. One hundred thousand children were to be picked completely at random; brown, yellow, black, white, red; sick or well; genius or moron; every child had an equal chance. This fact, this fact alone gave every parent hope, and possibly prevented world-wide rioting.

But with the destruction of the planet an almost certainty, the collective nervous system was just one micron away from explosion. There was nothing else to think about or talk about, and no one tried to pretend any different.

Rothwell's eyes moved involuntarily to the little spherical tri-photo on his desk, just an informal shot he'd snapped a few months back of Martha and her proudest possessions, their rambunctious, priceless off-spring: Jim, Jr., in his space scouts uniform, and Mary Ellen with that crazy hair-do she was so proud of then, but had already
"Damn!" he said aloud. "Dammit to hell!" In one quick movement, he spun his chair around and jabbed at the intercom. "Get the heli!" His voice crackled.

Grabbing his hat, he yanked open the door and strode into the sudden quiet of the small office. He turned right and went out through a side entrance to a small landing ramp, arriving just as his personal heli touched down. He climbed in. "To the ship."

As he settled back in the hard seat, Rothwell offered a silent thanks that, instead of asking which ship, Sergeant Johnson promptly lifted and headed for the gray space vessel that dominated the field.

A few hundred yards from the craft he said, "You'd better set her down here, Sarge, and let me walk in. Our friends might get nervous about something flying in at them."

He jumped out, squinting against the hot glare off the concrete, and then, with a slight uneasiness, stepped into the dark shadow that pointed a thousand feet along the runway, away from the setting sun. He walked towards the ship.

A few seconds later, his eye caught a small, unexplained flash and he threw himself flat just as a section of pavement exploded, a dozen feet ahead.

Cursing, Rothwell picked himself off the ground, brushed the dust off his uniform, and stood quietly. He didn't have long to wait.

A small cubicle jutted out from the ship and lowered itself along a monorail running down to the ground. The side nearest him opened revealing, as Rothwell expected, Commander Aku and his lieutenant who both hurried over to where he was standing, as if to keep him from coming forward to meet them--and in so doing coming nearer the ship. As the commander trotted rapidly towards him, Rothwell noted that he was still buttoning his jacket and that the shirt underneath looked suspiciously as if it hadn't been buttoned at all. Funny, he thought, that my presence should cause such a panic.

"General, what a pleasure." The commander's disconcerted look belied his words, but even as he spoke he began to regain his composure and assume the poker face that Rothwell had come to expect.

"I do hope," said Rothwell, "that my visit hasn't inconvenienced you."

Aku and his lieutenant traded swift glances, neither said anything.

"Well," Rothwell began again, "I am here to convey to you the good wishes of the President of our country and to submit a request from him and from the other governments of the Earth."

Aku straightened. "Though merely the commander of a poor trading fleet, I feel sure I speak for my empire when I wish your President good health. The request?"

Rothwell spoke evenly, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Commander, when the attack comes we expect that Earth with all its life will be annihilated. But your offer to transport a hundred thousand children to your own home worlds has prevented despair, and has at least given us hope that if we will not see the future our children will."

Aku nodded slightly, avoiding his eyes. "You take it well."

"But it takes more than hope, Commander. We need some assurance, also, that our children will be all right."

He took an involuntary step nearer the alien, whose facial muscles never moved, and who turned away slightly, refusing to meet Rothwell's eyes.

"Commander, you and your lieutenant are the only members of your race that we have ever seen, and then only on official business. We would like very much to meet the others. Why don't you land your ships and give the crews liberty, so that we can meet them informally and they can get to know us, also? That way it won't seem as if we are giving our kids over to complete strangers."

Without turning his head, Aku said flatly, "That is impossible. Do you want reasons?"

"No," Rothwell said quietly. "If you don't want to do something, it's easy enough to think up reasons." He ached to reach out and grab the alien neck, to shake some expression into that frozen face. "Look, Commander, surely the friendship of a doomed race can't bring any harm to your crew!"

Aku faced him now. "What you ask is impossible."

Ashamed of the desperate note that crept inadvertently into his voice, Rothwell said, "Commander, will you let me, alone, briefly enter your ship, so that I can tell my people what it is like?"

Aku and the lieutenant traded a long, silent look, then the lieutenant almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders. Without moving, turned partly away from Rothwell, Aku said, simply, "No." The two started to walk back to the ship.

"Commander!"

They stopped, but didn't turn.
"Commander Aku, if you have any sort of God in your empire, or any sort of honor that your race swears by, please tell me one thing--tell me that our children will be safe, I won't ask you anything else."

The two aliens stood still, facing away from him, towards their ship. Minutes passed. Rothwell stood quietly, looking at their backs, human appearing, but hiding unguessable thoughts. Neither of them moved, or said a word. Finally, he turned and walked away, back towards his heli.

He leaned back in the little heli's bucket seat and ran a large hand through unruly yellow hair that was already flecked with white. The first evening lights of Brooklyn and Queens and, off to the left, Manhattan, moved unseen beneath him as the craft headed towards his home. Dammit, he thought, is it that Aku just doesn't care what we think, or that he cares very much what we would think if we knew whatever it is he's hiding?

He banged his fists together in frustration. How the hell can anyone guess what goes on in an alien mind? His whole damn brain is probably completely different! Maybe to him a poker face is friendly. Maybe he's honestly not hiding anything at all. He looked out as the heli slowly started its descent. No evidence, he thought. Not a shred, except a suspicious mind and, he glanced at the dirt on his trousers, and a shell exploding in my face.

He slapped his hat back on and whirled to the surprised pilot. "Dammit, I don't make the decisions, I'm just in charge of loading, and if the President says it's okay, then it's okay with me!" He stepped out onto the grass of his yard, and quashed a little shriek of conscience somewhere in the back of his mind.

* * * * *

Blinding lights pinned him in mid-stride. A familiar voice sprang out of the glare, "Here he is now viewers, General James Rothwell, commander of the western armies, and head of the Earth evacuation project. General, International-TV cameras have been waiting secretly in your yard for hours for your return."

As his eyes adjusted, Rothwell distinguished a camera crew, their small portable instrument, and a young, smooth-talking announcer that he had seen several times on television. He forced the annoyance out of his eyes. This, he thought, is all I need.

"What the general doesn't know," the announcer went on, "is that earlier this evening it was announced by Moscow Central that the computers had picked his son as one of the evacuees!"

The shock was visible on 150,000,000 TV sets. Completely unexpected, the surprise of the announcement hit Rothwell like a physical blow; his eyes widened, his chin dropped, and for an instant the world's viewers read in his face the frank emotions of a father, unshielded by military veneer. Then years of training took command, and he faced the camera, apparently calm, though churning internally. The odds, he thought confusedly, the odds must be at least ten thousand to one! Then he realized that someone was talking to him, waving a microphone.

"Er, I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch ..." he mumbled at the camera.

The announcer laughed amiably. "Certainly can't blame you, this must be a really big night! How does it feel, General, for your son to be one of the evacuees?"

Something in the back of his mind twisted the question. How does it feel, General, to turn your only son over to a poker-faced alien who shoots when you walk near his ship? "I'm not sure," he said, "how I feel."

Talking excitedly, the announcer drew closer. "To think that your name will live forever in the vast star clusters of the galaxy!" He lowered his voice. "General, speaking now unofficially, as a parent, to the thousands of other parents whose children may also be selected, and to the rest of us who ..." he seemed to stumble for a word, and for an instant Rothwell saw him, too, as a man worried and afraid, instead of as part of a television machine. "Well, General, you've had contact with the aliens, are you glad your son is going?"

Rothwell looked at the strained face of the announcer, at the camera crew quietly eyeing him, and at the small huddled group of neighbors hovering in the background, and he knew that his next words might be the most critical he would ever use in his life. In a world strained emotionally almost beyond endurance, the wrong words, a hint of a suspicion, could spark the riots that would kill millions and bring total destruction.

He faced the camera and said calmly, "I am glad my son is going. I wish it could happen for everyone. Commander Aku has assured me that everything will turn out all right." Mentally he begged for forgiveness, there was nothing else he could say. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he tried to fight down the memory of Aku turning his back on the plea that echoed in his brain--"tell me that our children will be safe."

The front door of the house banged open and all at once Martha was in his arms, crying, laughing. "Oh, Jim, I'm so glad, so very glad!" Rothwell blinked his eyes as he put his arm around her and waved the camera away. Tears sparkled on his cheeks; but neither Martha nor the viewers knew why.

* * * * *

The next morning Aku and his ever-present lieutenant were waiting when Rothwell's heli set him down in front of the administration building, a few minutes later than usual. They followed him into his office.

"Coffee?" Rothwell held out a paper cup.

"No, thank you," said Aku, as expressionless as ever. "We are here to make final arrangements for the
"I see. Well," said Rothwell, "Thursday will be a very painful day for us and we will want to expedite things as much as possible."

Aku nodded.

Rothwell went on. "I have made arrangements to have a hundred air fields cleared at various population centers around the world. That way your ships can land simultaneously, one at each field, and the loading can be finished in very little time. Now," he opened a desk drawer, "here is a list, of ..."

* * * * *

Aku held up a fur-covered hand. "That will not be possible."

Rothwell looked down at his desk and closed his eyes briefly. I knew it, he thought, I knew this would happen, sure as hell. He raised his head. "Impossible?"

"We will first land twenty ships. These twenty must be fully loaded and back in orbit before the next will land. We will use the first twenty air fields on your list."

Rothwell took a deep breath. "But I thought you wanted to get away as soon as possible! It will take at least an extra day to load according to your scheme."

"Will it?" Aku moved to go, his lieutenant reached to open the door.

On an impulse, Rothwell stepped forward. "Commander, if you had a son would you send him away like this?"

Aku stopped, and looked directly at him with even, black eyes; then the gaze moved through and past him, to the window and the ship beyond. For a minute his expression altered, changing almost to one of pain. When he spoke, it was almost to himself. "My father loved his children more than ..." He started as his lieutenant suddenly clapped a hand on his shoulder. The expression vanished. They left together, without looking at Rothwell or saying another word.

For several minutes Rothwell stared frowning at the closed door. He walked thoughtfully back to his desk, and lowered himself slowly into the chair.

He sat for a long time, trying to puzzle through the picture. Finally he stood and paced the room. "Suppose," he said to himself, "just suppose that not all of those hundred ships up there are really cargo ships. Suppose that, say, only twenty are. Then, after those twenty were loaded ..." He swung around to look again at the long, slim silhouette poised high against the main runway. "With ocean vessels, it's the fighting ships that are lean and slender."

Bending over his desk, he nudged an intercom button with his finger. "Doc, how would one go about trying to understand an alien's reactions?"

Philips' voice shot right back. "Well, Jim, the very first thing, you'd have to be sure they weren't exactly the same as a human's reactions."

Rothwell paused, startled. "It can't be, Doc. Why, if Aku was a human I'd say ..." He stiffened, feeling the hair rise at the back of his neck. The short, curt answers, the refusal to meet his eyes, the frozen expression clicked into pattern. "Doc ... I'd say he was being forced to do something he hated like hell to do."

Tensely, he straightened and contemplated the lean, gray spaceship. Then he whirled around and slapped every button on the intercom.

* * * * *

Thursday. The sun pecked fitfully at the low overcast while a sullen crowd watched a squat alien ship descend vertically, to finally settle with a flaming belch not far from the first. Similar crowds watched similar landings at nineteen other airports around the world, but the loading was to start first in New York.

An elevator-like box swung out from the fat belly of the ship and was lowered rapidly to the ground. Two golden-hued aliens, in uniforms resembling Aku's, stepped out and walked about a thousand feet towards the crowd. Only children actually being loaded were to go beyond this point; parents had to stay at the airport gates.

"When do I go, Dad?"

"Shortly, son." Rothwell laid his hand on the lean shoulder. "You're in the second hundred." There was a brief, awkward silence. "Martha, you'd better take him over to the line." He held out his hand. "So long, son."

Jim, Jr., shook his hand gravely, then, without a word, suddenly threw his hands tight around his younger sister. He took his mother's hand, and they walked slowly over to the sad line that was forming beyond the gate.

Rothwell turned to his daughter. "You going over there too, kitten?" The words were gruff in his tight throat. She wiped a hand quickly across her cheek. "No, Dad, I guess I'll stay here with you." She stood close beside him.

Aku, forgotten until now, cleared his throat. "I think the loading should start, General."

Raising his hand in a half-salute, Rothwell signaled to a captain standing near the gate who turned and motioned to a small cordon of military police. Shortly, a group of fifty of the first youngsters in the line separated from the others and moved slowly out onto the concrete ribbon towards the waiting ship. The rest of the line
hesitated, then edged reluctantly up to the gate, to take the place of the fifty who had left. They waited there, the children of a thousand families, suddenly dead quiet, staring after the fifty that slowly moved away.

They walked quietly, in a tight group, without any antics or horseplay which, in itself, gave the event an air of unreality. Approaching the ship, they seemed to huddle even closer together, forming a pathetically tiny cluster in the shadow of the towering space cruiser. The title of a book that he had read once, many years before, flashed unexpectedly in Rothwell's memory, The Story of Mankind. He looked sadly after the fifty, then back at the silent line. Were these frightened kids now writing the final period in the last chapter? He shook himself, work to be done, no time now for daydreams.

As the fifty reached the ship and started to enter the elevator, Rothwell turned and beckoned to some technicians standing out of sight just inside the entrance to the control tower. Three of them ran out and set up what looked like a television set, only with three screens. One ran back, unreeling a power cable, while a fourth flicked on a bank of switches, making feverish, minute adjustments. Rothwell felt the sweat in his hands. "Is it okay, Sergeant?"

The back of the sergeant's shirt was wet though the air was cool. "It's got to be, sir!" His fingers played across the knobs. "All that metal, the whole thing is critical as ... Ah!" He jumped back. The screens flashed into life.

* * * * *

Aku stiffened. His lieutenant gasped audibly, made a jerky movement towards the screens, then suddenly became aware of three MPs standing beside him, hands nonchalantly cradling blunt-nosed weapons.

All three receivers showed similar scenes, the milling youngsters and the ship, but from up close, the pictures jerking and swaying erratically as if the cameras were somehow fastened to moving human beings. Then the scenes condensed into a cramped, jostling blackness as the fifty crowded into the elevator and were lifted up the side of the ship.

Next, were three views of a large room, bare except for what appeared to be overhead cranes and other mechanical paraphernalia of a military shop or warehouse. For a while the fifty moved about restlessly, then the cameras swung about simultaneously to face a wall that slowly slid apart.

Rothwell froze. "Good Lord!"

Six murky things moved from the open wall towards the cameras, which fell back to the opposite side of the room. Each was large, many times the size of a man, but somehow indistinct, for the cameras didn't convey any sense of shape or form. For an instant, one of the screens flashed a picture of a terrified human face, and arms raised protectively as the shadowy things moved in upon the group.

A projection snapped out from one, grabbed two of the humans, and hurled them into a corner. Then it motioned a dozen or so others over to the same spot. With similar harsh, sweeping movements, the group of humans was quickly broken up into three roughly equal segments. One of the groups seemed to be protecting someone who appeared seriously hurt. A black tentacle lashed out and one of the screens went blank. Then another.

The third showed a small group pushed stumbling through a narrow door, down a short passageway, and abruptly into blackness. Something that looked like bars flashed across the screen, then a dark liquid trickled across the camera lens, blotting out the view.

Eyes blazing, Rothwell whirled on Aku. "Throughout our history, Commander, humans have had one thing in common, our blasted pride! We will not turn over our young to slavery, and by hell if we die, we'll die fighting!" He jerked up his coat sleeve, barked an order into a small transmitter on his wrist, and, grabbing his daughter, threw himself flat on the concrete.

Hesitating only an instant, Aku, his lieutenant, and the MPs hit the ground as both spaceships vanished in a cataclysmic eruption of flame and steel.

Raising his head, Rothwell grinned crazily into the exploding debris, imagining nineteen other ships suddenly disintegrating under the rocket guns of nineteen different nations. He saw Earth, like a giant porcupine, flicking thousands of atom tipped missiles into space from hundreds of submarines and secret bases--the war power of the great nations, designed for the ruin of each other, united to destroy the alien fleet.

He turned to Aku, "Midgets, volunteers with miniature TV cameras ..." he stopped.

The commander and his lieutenant had flung their arms about each other and were crying like babies. Tentatively, Aku reached towards him. "Those things, the Eleele, from another galaxy." He struggled for words. "They captured your scout crew and implanted memories of thousands of ships to create fear and make it easier to take slaves before blasting you." He glanced up at the flashes in the sky. "This was their only fleet."

Rothwell glared. "You helped them."

Aku nodded miserably. "We had to. They thought you'd trust us because we look almost human. It was a trick that worked before." Tears streamed across his face, matting the golden fur. "You see, the radioactive planets your
Of all the irksome, frustrating, maddening discoveries--was there no way of keeping it discovered?

With so much at stake, Charles Dennison should not have been careless. An inventor cannot afford carelessness, particularly when his invention is extremely valuable and obviously patentable. There are too many grasping hands ready to seize what belongs to someone else, too many men who feast upon the creativity of the innocent.

A touch of paranoia would have served Dennison well; but he was lacking in that vital characteristic of inventors. And he didn't even realize the full extent of his carelessness until a bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head.

Then he knew. But by then it was too late.

Charles Dennison had been left a more than adequate income by his father. He had gone to Harvard, served a hitch in the Navy, then continued his education at M.I.T. Since the age of thirty-two, he had been engaged in private research, working in his own small laboratory in Riverdale, New York. Plant biology was his field. He published several noteworthy papers, and sold a new insecticide to a development corporation. The royalties helped him to expand his facilities.

Dennison enjoyed working alone. It suited his temperament, which was austere but not unfriendly. Two or three times a year, he would come to New York, see some plays and movies, and do a little serious drinking. He would then return gratefully to his seclusion. He was a bachelor and seemed destined to remain that way.

Not long after his fortieth birthday, Dennison stumbled across an intriguing clue which led him into a different branch of biology. He pursued his clue, developed it, extended it slowly into a hypothesis. After three more years, a lucky accident put the final proofs into his hands.

He had invented a most effective longevity drug. It was not proof against violence; aside from that, however, it could fairly be called an immortality serum.

* * * * *

Now was the time for caution. But years of seclusion had made Dennison unwary of people and their motives. He was more or less heedless of the world around him; it never occurred to him that the world was not equally heedless of him.

He thought only about his serum. It was valuable and patentable. But was it the sort of thing that should be revealed? Was the world ready for an immortality drug?

He had never enjoyed speculation of this sort. But since the atom bomb, many scientists had been forced to look at the ethics of their profession. Dennison looked at his and decided that immortality was inevitable.

Mankind had, throughout its existence, poked and probed into the recesses of nature, trying to figure out how things worked. If one man didn't discover fire, or the use of the lever, or gunpowder, or the atom bomb, or immortality, another would. Man willed to know all nature's secrets, and there was no way of keeping them hidden.

Armed with this bleak but comforting philosophy, Dennison packed his formulas and proofs into a briefcase, slipped a two-ounce bottle of the product into a jacket pocket, and left his Riverdale laboratory. It was already evening. He planned to spend the night in a good midtown hotel, see a movie, and proceed to the Patent Office in Washington the following day.

On the subway, Dennison was absorbed in a newspaper. He was barely conscious of the men sitting on either side of him. He became aware of them only when the man on his right poked him firmly in the ribs.

"What is this?" Dennison asked.

"Hand it over," the man said.

Dennison was stunned. How could anyone have known about his discovery? And how could they dare try to rob him in a public subway car?
Then he realized that they were probably just after his money.

"I don't have much on me," Dennison said hoarsely, reaching for his wallet.

The man on his left leaned over and slapped the briefcase. "Not money," he said. "The immortality stuff."

* * * * *

In some unaccountable fashion, they knew. What if he refused to give up his briefcase? Would they dare fire the automatic in the subway? It was a very small caliber weapon. Its noise might not even be heard above the subway's roar. And probably they felt justified in taking the risk for a prize as great as the one Dennison carried.

He looked at them quickly. They were mild-looking men, quietly, almost somberly dressed. Something about their clothing jogged Dennison's memory unpleasantly, but he didn't have time to place the recollection. The automatic was digging painfully into his ribs.

The subway was coming to a station. Dennison glanced at the man on his left and caught the glint of light on a tiny hypodermic.

Many inventors, involved only in their own thoughts, are slow of reaction. But Dennison had been a gunnery officer in the Navy and had seen his share of action. He was damned if he was going to give up his invention so easily.

He jumped from his seat and the hypo passed through the sleeve of his coat, just missing his arm. He swung the briefcase at the man with the automatic, catching him across the forehead with the metal edge. As the doors opened, he ran past a popeyed subway guard, up the stairs and into the street.

The two men followed, one of them streaming blood from his forehead. Dennison ran, looking wildly around for a policeman.

The men behind him were screaming, "Stop, thief! Police! Police! Stop that man!"

Apparently they were also prepared to face the police and to claim the briefcase and bottle as their own. Ridiculous! Yet the complete and indignant confidence in their shrill voices unnerved Dennison. He hated a scene.

Still, a policeman would be best. The briefcase was filled with proof of who he was. Even his name was initialed on the outside of the briefcase. One glance would tell anyone ...

He caught a flash of metal from his briefcase, and, still running, looked at it. He was shocked to see a metal plate fixed to the cowhide, over the place where his initials had been. The man on his left must have done that when he slapped the briefcase.

Dennison dug at the plate with his fingertips, but it would not come off.

It read, Property of Edward James Flaherty, Smithfield Institute.

Perhaps a policeman wouldn't be so much help, after all.

But the problem was academic, for Dennison saw no policeman along the crowded Bronx street. People stood aside as he ran past, staring open-mouthed, offering neither assistance nor interference. But the men behind him were still screaming, "Stop the thief! Stop the thief!"

The entire long block was alerted. The people, like some sluggish beast goaded reluctantly into action, began to make tentative movements toward Dennison, impelled by the outraged cries of his pursuers.

* * * * *

Unless he balanced the scales of public opinion, some do-gooder was going to interfere soon. Dennison conquered his shyness and pride, and called out, "Help me! They're trying to rob me! Stop them!"

But his voice lacked the moral indignation, the absolute conviction of his two shrill-voiced pursuers. A burly young man stepped forward to block Dennison's way, but at the last moment a woman pulled him back.

"Don't get into trouble, Charley."

"Why don't someone call a cop?"

"Yeah, where are the cops?"

"Over at a big fire on 178th Street, I hear."

"We oughta stop that guy."

"I'm willing if you're willing."

Dennison's way was suddenly blocked by four grinning youths, teen-agers in black motorcycle jackets and boots, excited by the chance for a little action, delighted at the opportunity to hit someone in the name of law and order.

Dennison saw them, swerved suddenly and sprinted across the street. A bus loomed in front of him.

He hurled himself out of its way, fell, got up again and ran on.

His pursuers were delayed by the dense flow of traffic. Their high-pitched cries faded as Dennison turned into a side street, ran down its length, then down another.

He was in a section of massive apartment buildings. His lungs felt like a blast furnace and his left side seemed to be sewed together with red-hot wire. There was no help for it, he had to rest.
It was then that the first bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head. That was when Dennison realized the full extent of his carelessness.

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket. He had hoped to carry out more experiments on the serum before trying it on human beings. Now there was no choice.

Dennison yanked out the stopper and drained the contents.

Immediately he was running again, as a second bullet scored the granite wall. The great blocks of apartments loomed endlessly ahead of him, silent and alien. There were no walkers upon the streets. There was only Dennison, running more slowly now past the immense, blank-faced apartments.

* * * * *

A long black car came up behind him, its searchlight probing into doors and alleys. Was it the police?

"That's him!" cried the shrill, unnerving voice of one of Dennison's pursuers.

Dennison ducked into a narrow alley between buildings, raced down it and into the next street.

There were two cars on that street, at either end of the block, their headlights shining toward each other, moving slowly to trap him in the middle. The alley gleamed with light now, from the first car's headlights shining down it. He was surrounded.

Dennison raced to the nearest apartment building and yanked at the door. It was locked. The two cars were almost even with him. And, looking at them, Dennison remembered the unpleasant jog his memory had given him earlier.

The two cars were hearses.

The men in the subway, with their solemn faces, solemn clothing, subdued neckties, shrill, indignant voices--they had reminded him of undertakers. They had been undertakers!

Of course! Of course! Oil companies might want to block the invention of a cheap new fuel which could put them out of business; steel corporations might try to stop the development of an inexpensive, stronger-than-steel plastic...

And the production of an immortality serum would put the undertakers out of business.

His progress, and the progress of thousands of other researchers in biology, must have been watched. And when he made his discovery, they had been ready.

The hearses stopped, and somber-faced, respectable-looking men in black suits and pearl-gray neckties poured out and seized him. The briefcase was yanked out of his hand. He felt the prick of a needle in his shoulder. Then, with no transitional dizziness, he passed out.

* * * * *

He came to sitting in an armchair. There were armed men on either side of him. In front of him stood a small, plump, undistinguished-looking man in sedate clothing.

"My name is Mr. Bennet," the plump man said. "I wish to beg your forgiveness, Mr. Dennison, for the violence to which you were subjected. We found out about your invention only at the last moment and therefore had to improvise. The bullets were meant only to frighten and delay you. Murder was not our intention."

"You merely wanted to steal my discovery," Dennison said.

"Not at all," Mr. Bennet told him. "The secret of immortality has been in our possession for quite some time."

"I see. Then you want to keep immortality from the public in order to safeguard your damned undertaking business!"

"Isn't that rather a naive view?" Mr. Bennet asked, smiling. "As it happens, my associates and I are not undertakers. We took on the disguise in order to present an understandable motive if our plan to capture you had misfired. In that event, others would have believed exactly--and only--what you thought: that our purpose was to safeguard our business."

"But what's the purpose behind it all?"
"Earth's welfare," Mr. Bennet said promptly. "Consider what would happen if the people were given your veritable immortality serum. The problems of birth rate, food production, living space all would be aggravated. Tensions would mount, war would be imminent--"

"So what?" Dennison challenged. "That's how things are right now, without immortality. Besides, there have been cries of doom about every new invention or discovery. Gunpowder, the printing press, nitroglycerin, the atom bomb, they were all supposed to destroy the race. But mankind has learned how to handle them. It had to! You can't turn back the clock, and you can't un-discover something. If it's there, mankind must deal with it!"

"Yes, in a bumbling, bloody, inefficient fashion," said Mr. Bennet, with an expression of distaste.

"Well, that's how Man is."

"Not if he's properly led," Mr. Bennet said.

"No?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Bennet. "You see, the immortality serum provides a solution to the problem of political power. Rule by a permanent and enlightened elite is by far the best form of government; infinitely better than the blundering inefficiencies of democratic rule. But throughout history, this elite, whether monarchy, oligarchy, dictatorship or junta, has been unable to perpetuate itself. Leaders die, the followers squabble for power, and chaos is close behind. With immortality, this last flaw would be corrected. There would be no discontinuity of leadership, for the leaders would always be there."

"A permanent dictatorship," Dennison said.

"Yes. A permanent, benevolent rule by small, carefully chosen elite corps, based upon the sole and exclusive possession of immortality. It's historically inevitable. The only question is, who is going to get control first?"

"And you think you are?" Dennison demanded.

"Of course. Our organization is still small, but absolutely solid. It is bolstered by every new invention that comes into our hands and by every scientist who joins our ranks. Our time will come, Dennison! We'd like to have you with us, among the elite."

"You want me to join you?" Dennison asked, bewildered.

"We do. Our organization needs creative scientific minds to help us in our work, to help us save mankind from itself."

"Count me out," Dennison said, his heart beating fast.

"You won't join us?"

"I'd like to see you all hanged."

Mr. Bennet nodded thoughtfully and pursed his small lips. "You have taken your own serum, have you not?"

Dennison nodded. "I suppose that means you kill me now?"

"We don't kill," Mr. Bennet said. "We merely wait. I think you are a reasonable man, and I think you'll come to see things our way. We'll be around a long time. So will you. Take him away."

Dennison was led to an elevator that dropped deep into the Earth. He was marched down a long passageway lined with armed men. They went through four massive doors. At the fifth, Dennison was pushed inside alone, and the door was locked behind him.

He was in a large, well-furnished apartment. There were perhaps twenty people in the room, and they came forward to meet him.

One of them, a stocky, bearded man, was an old college acquaintance of Dennison's.

"Jim Ferris?"

"That's right," Ferris said. "Welcome to the Immortality Club, Dennison."

"I read you were killed in an air crash last year."

"I merely--disappeared," Ferris said, with a rueful smile, "after inventing the immortality serum. Just like the others."

"All of them?"

"Fifteen of the men here invented the serum independently. The rest are successful inventors in other fields. Our oldest member is Doctor Li, a serum discoverer, who disappeared from San Francisco in 1911. You are our latest acquisition. Our clubhouse is probably the most carefully guarded place on Earth."

Dennison said, "Nineteen-eleven!" Despair flooded him and he sat down heavily in a chair. "Then there's no possibility of rescue?"

"None. There are only four choices available to us," Ferris said. "Some have left us and joined the Undertakers. Others have suicided. A few have gone insane. The rest of us have formed the Immortality Club."

"What for?" Dennison bewilderedly asked.
"To get out of this place!" said Ferris. "To escape and give our discoveries to the world. To stop those hopeful little dictators upstairs."

"They must know what you're planning."

"Of course. But they let us live because, every so often, one of us gives up and joins them. And they don't think we can ever break out. They're much too smug. It's the basic defect of all power-elites, and their eventual undoing."

"You said this was the most closely guarded place on Earth?"

"It is," Ferris said.

"And some of you have been trying to break out for fifty years? Why, it'll take forever to escape!"

"Forever is exactly how long we have," said Ferris. "But we hope it won't take quite that long. Every new man brings new ideas, plans. One of them is bound to work."

"Forever," Dennison said, his face buried in his hands.

"You can go back upstairs and join them," Ferris said, with a hard note to his voice, "or you can suicide, or just sit in a corner and go quietly mad. Take your pick."

Dennison looked up. "I must be honest with you and with myself. I don't think we can escape. Furthermore, I don't think any of you really believe we can."

Ferris shrugged his shoulders.

"Aside from that," Dennison said, "I think it's a damned good idea. If you'll bring me up to date, I'll contribute whatever I can to the Forever Project. And let's hope their complacency lasts."

"It will," Ferris said.

* * * * *

The escape did not take forever, of course. In one hundred and thirty-seven years, Dennison and his colleagues made their successful breakout and revealed the Undertakers' Plot. The Undertakers were tried before the High Court on charges of kidnapping, conspiracy to overthrow the government, and illegal possession of immortality. They were found guilty on all counts and summarily executed.

Dennison and his colleagues were also in illegal possession of immortality, which is the privilege only of our governmental elite. But the death penalty was waived in view of the Immortality Club's service to the State.

This mercy was premature, however. After some months the members of the Immortality Club went into hiding, with the avowed purpose of overthrowing the Elite Rule and disseminating immortality among the masses. Project Forever, as they termed it, has received some support from dissidents, who have not yet been apprehended. It cannot be considered a serious threat.

But this deviationist action in no way detracts from the glory of the Club's escape from the Undertakers. The ingenious way in which Dennison and his colleagues broke out of their seemingly impregnable prison, using only a steel belt buckle, a tungsten filament, three hens' eggs, and twelve chemicals that can be readily obtained from the human body, is too well known to be repeated here.

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**Contents**

**THE HOUR OF BATTLE**

**BY ROBERT SHECKLEY**

As one of the Guardian ships protecting Earth, the crew had a problem to solve. Just how do you protect a race from an enemy who can take over a man's mind without seeming effort or warning?

"That hand didn't move, did it?" Edwardson asked, standing at the port, looking at the stars.

"No," Morse said. He had been staring fixedly at the Attison Detector for over an hour. Now he blinked three times rapidly, and looked again. "Not a millimeter."

"I don't think it moved either," Cassel added, from behind the gunfire panel. And that was that. The slender black hand of the indicator rested unwaveringly on zero. The ship's guns were ready, their black mouths open to the stars. A steady hum filled the room. It came from the Attison Detector, and the sound was reassuring. It reinforced the fact that the Detector was attached to all the other Detectors, forming a gigantic network around Earth.

"Why in hell don't they come?" Edwardson asked, still looking at the stars. "Why don't they hit?"

"Aah, shut up," Morse said. He had a tired, glum look. High on his right temple was an old radiation burn, a sunburst of pink scar tissue. From a distance it looked like a decoration.

"I just wish they'd come," Edwardson said. He returned from the port to his chair, bending to clear the low metal ceiling. "Don't you wish they'd come?" Edwardson had the narrow, timid face of a mouse; but a highly
intelligent mouse. One that cats did well to avoid.

"Don't you?" he repeated.

The other men didn't answer. They had settled back to their dreams, staring hypnotically at the Detector face.

"They've had enough time," Edwardson said, half to himself.

Cassel yawned and licked his lips. "Anyone want to play some gin?" he asked, stroking his beard. The beard was a memento of his undergraduate days. Cassel maintained he could store almost fifteen minutes worth of oxygen in its follicles. He had never stepped into space unhelmeted to prove it.

Morse looked away, and Edwardson automatically watched the indicator. This routine had been drilled into them, branded into their subconscious. They would as soon have cut their throats as leave the indicator unguarded.

"Do you think they'll come soon?" Edwardson asked, his brown rodent's eyes on the indicator. The men didn't answer him. After two months together in space their conversational powers were exhausted. They weren't interested in Cassel's undergraduate days, or in Morse's conquests.

They were bored to death even with their own thoughts and dreams, bored with the attack they expected momentarily.

"Just one thing I'd like to know," Edwardson said, slipping with ease into an old conversational gambit. "How far can they do it?"

They had talked for weeks about the enemy's telepathic range, but they always returned to it.

As professional soldiers, they couldn't help but speculate on the enemy and his weapons. It was their shop talk.

"Well," Morse said wearily, "Our Detector network covers the system out beyond Mars' orbit."

"Where we sit," Cassel said, watching the indicators now that the others were talking.

"They might not even know we have a detection unit working," Morse said, as he had said a thousand times.

"Oh, stop," Edwardson said, his thin face twisted in scorn. "They're telepathic. They must have read every bit of stuff in Everset's mind."

"Everset didn't know we had a detection unit," Morse said, his eyes returning to the dial. "He was captured before we had it."

"Look," Edwardson said, "They ask him, 'Boy, what would you do if you knew a telepathic race was coming to take over Earth? How would you guard the planet?'"

"Idle speculation," Cassel said. "Maybe Everset didn't think of this."

"He thinks like a man, doesn't he? Everyone agreed on this defense. Everset would, too."


"I sure wish he hadn't been captured," Edwardson said.

"It could have been worse," Morse put in, his face sadder than ever. "What if they'd captured both of them?"

"I wish they'd come," Edwardson said.

* * * * *

Richard Everset and C. R. Jones had gone on the first interstellar flight. They had found an inhabited planet in the region of Vega. The rest was standard procedure.

A flip of the coin had decided it. Everset went down in the scouter, maintaining radio contact with Jones, in the ship.

The recording of that contact was preserved for all Earth to hear.

"Just met the natives," Everset said. "Funny-looking bunch. Give you the physical description later."

"Are they trying to talk to you?" Jones asked, guiding the ship in a slow spiral over the planet.

"No. Hold it. Well I'm damned! They're telepathic! How do you like that?"

"Great," Jones said. "Go on."

"Hold it. Say, Jonesy, I don't know as I like these boys. They haven't got nice minds. Brother!"

"What is it?" Jones asked, lifting the ship a little higher.

"Minds! These bastards are power-crazy. Seems they've hit all the systems around here, looking for someone to--"

"Yeh?"

"I've got that a bit wrong," Everset said pleasantly. "They are not so bad."

Jones had a quick mind, a suspicious nature and good reflexes. He set the accelerator for all the G's he could take, lay down on the floor and said, "Tell me more."

"Come on down," Everset said, in violation of every law of spaceflight. "These guys are all right. As a matter of fact, they're the most marvelous--"

That was where the recording ended, because Jones was pinned to the floor by twenty G's acceleration as he boosted the ship to the level needed for the C-jump.

He broke three ribs getting home, but he got there.
A telepathic species was on the march. What was Earth going to do about it?

A lot of speculation necessarily clothed the bare bones of Jones' information. Evidently the species could take over a mind with ease. With Everset, it seemed that they had insinuated their thoughts into his, delicately altering his previous convictions. They had possessed him with remarkable ease.

How about Jones? Why hadn't they taken him? Was distance a factor? Or hadn't they been prepared for the suddenness of his departure?

One thing was certain. Everything Everset knew, the enemy knew. That meant they knew where Earth was, and how defenseless the planet was to their form of attack.

It could be expected that they were on their way.

Something was needed to nullify their tremendous advantage. But what sort of something? What armor is there against thought? How do you dodge a wavelength?

Pouch-eyed scientists gravely consulted their periodic tables.

And how do you know when a man has been possessed? Although the enemy was clumsy with Everset, would they continue to be clumsy? Wouldn't they learn?

Psychologists tore their hair and bewailed the absence of an absolute scale for humanity.

Of course, something had to be done at once. The answer, from a technological planet, was a technological one.

Build a space fleet and equip it with some sort of a detection-fire network.

This was done in record time. The Attison Detector was developed, a cross between radar and the electroencephalograph. Any alteration from the typical human brain wave pattern of the occupants of a Detector-equipped ship would boost the indicator around the dial. Even a bad dream or a case of indigestion would jar it.

It seemed probable that any attempt to take over a human mind would disturb something. There had to be a point of interaction, somewhere.

That was what the Attison Detector was supposed to detect. Maybe it would.

The spaceships, three men to a ship, dotted space between Earth and Mars, forming a gigantic sphere with Earth in the center.

Tens of thousands of men crouched behind gunfire panels, watching the dials on the Attison Detector.

The unmoving dials.

"Do you think I could fire a couple of bursts?" Edwardson asked, his fingers on the gunfire button. "Just to limber the guns?"

"Those guns don't need limbering," Cassel said, stroking his beard. "Besides, you'd throw the whole fleet into a panic."

"Cassel," Morse said, very quietly. "Get your hand off your beard."

"Why should I?" Cassel asked.

"Because," Morse answered, almost in a whisper, "I am about to ram it right down your fat throat."

Cassel grinned and tightened his fists. "Pleasure," he said. "I'm tired of looking at that scar of yours." He stood up.

"Cut it," Edwardson said wearily. "Watch the birdie."

"No reason to, really," Morse said, leaning back. "There's an alarm bell attached." But he looked at the dial.

"What if the bell doesn't work?" Edwardson asked. "What if the dial is jammed? How would you like something cold slithering into your mind?"

"The dial'll work," Cassel said. His eyes shifted from Edwardson's face to the motionless indicator.

"I think I'll sack in," Edwardson said.

"Stick around," Cassel said. "Play you some gin."

"All right." Edwardson found and shuffled the greasy cards, while Morse took a turn glaring at the dial.

"I sure wish they'd come," he said.

"Cut," Edwardson said, handing the pack to Cassel.

"I wonder what our friends look like," Morse said, watching the dial.

"Probably remarkably like us," Edwardson said, dealing the cards. Cassel picked them up one by one, slowly, as if he hoped something interesting would be under them.

"They should have given us another man," Cassel said. "We could play bridge."

"I don't play bridge," Edwardson said. "You could learn."

"Why didn't we send a task force?" Morse asked. "Why didn't we bomb their planet?"

"Don't be dumb," Edwardson said. "We'd lose any ship we sent. Probably get them back at us, possessed and firing."
“Knock with nine,” Cassel said.

“I don’t give a good damn if you knock with a thousand,” Edwardson said gaily. “How much do I owe you now?”

“Three million five hundred and eight thousand and ten. Dollars.”

“I sure wish they’d come,” Morse said.

“Want me to write a check?”

“Take your time. Take until next week.”

“Someone should reason with the bastards,” Morse said, looking out the port. Cassel immediately looked at the dial.

“I just thought of something,” Edwardson said.

“Yeh?”

“I bet it feels horrible to have your mind grabbed,” Edwardson said. “I bet it’s awful.”

“You’ll know when it happens,” Cassel said.

“Did Everset?”

“Probably. He just couldn’t do anything about it.”

“My mind feels fine,” Cassel said. “But the first one of you guys starts acting queer—watch out.”

They all laughed.

“Well,” Edwardson said, “I’d sure like a chance to reason with them. This is stupid.”

“Why not?” Cassel asked.

“You mean go out and meet them?”

“Sure,” Cassel said. “We’re doing no good sitting here.”

“I should think we could do something,” Edwardson said slowly. “After all, they’re not invincible. They’re reasoning beings.”

Morse punched a course on the ship’s tape, then looked up.

“You think we should contact the command? Tell them what we’re doing?”

“No!” Cassel said, and Edwardson nodded in agreement. “Red tape. We’ll just go out and see what we can do. If they won’t talk, we’ll blast ’em out of space.”

“Look!”

Out of the port they could see the red flare of a reaction engine; the next ship in their sector, speeding forward.

“They must have got the same idea,” Edwardson said.

“Let’s get there first,” Cassel said. Morse shoved the accelerator in and they were thrown back in their seats.

“That dial hasn’t moved yet, has it?” Edwardson asked, over the clamor of the Detector alarm bell.

“Not a move out of it,” Cassel said, looking at the dial with its indicator slammed all the way over to the highest notch.

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**Contents**

**THE HAPPY UNFORTUNATE**

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Dekker, back from space, found great physical changes in the people of Earth; changes that would have horrified him five years before. But now, he wanted to be like the rest—even if he had to lose an eye and both ears to do it.

Rolf Dekker stared incredulously at the slim, handsome young Earther who was approaching the steps of Rolf’s tumbling-down Spacertown shack. He’s got no ears, Rolf noted in disbelief. After five years in space, Rolf had come home to a strangely-altered world, and he found it hard to accept.

Another Earther appeared. This one was about the same size, and gave the same impression of fragility. This one had ears, all right—and a pair of gleaming, two-inch horns on his forehead as well. I’ll be eternally roasted, Rolf thought. Now I’ve seen everything.

Both Earthers were dressed in neat, gold-inlaid green tunics, costumes which looked terribly out of place amid the filth of Spacertown, and their hair was dyed a light green to match.

He had been scrutinizing them for several moments before they became aware of him. They both spotted him at once and the one with no ears turned to his companion and whispered something. Rolf, leaning forward, strained to
"... beautiful, isn't he? That's the biggest one I've seen!"
"Come over here, won't you?" the horned one called, in a soft, gentle voice which contrasted oddly with the raucous bellowing Rolf had been accustomed to hearing in space. "We'd like to talk to you."
Just then Kanaday emerged from the door of the shack and limped down to the staircase.
"Hey, Rolf!" he called. "Leave those things alone!"
"Let me find out what they want first, huh?"
"Can't be any good, whatever it is," Kanaday growled. "Tell them to get out of here before I throw them back to wherever they came from. And make it fast."

The two Earthers looked at each other uneasily. Rolf walked toward them.
"He doesn't like Earthers, that's all," Rolf explained. "But he won't do anything but yell."
Kanaday spat in disgust, turned, and limped back inside the shack.
"I didn't know you were wearing horns," Rolf said.
The Earther flushed. "New style," he said. "Very expensive."
"Oh," Rolf said. "I'm new here; I just got back. Five years in space. When I left you people looked all alike. Now you wear horns."
"It's the new trend," said the earless one. "We're Individs. When you left the Conforms were in power, style-wise. But the new surgeons can do almost anything, you see."
The shadow of a frown crossed Rolf's face. "Anything?"
"Almost. They can't transform an Earther into aSpacer, and they don't think they ever will."
"Or vice versa?" Rolf asked.
They sniggered. "What Spacer would want to become an Earther? Who would give up that life, out in the stars?"

Rolf said nothing. He kicked at the heap of litter in the filthy street. What spacer indeed? he thought. He suddenly realized that the two little Earthers were staring up at him as if he were some sort of beast. He probably weighed as much as both of them, he knew, and at six-four he was better than a foot taller. They looked like children next to him, like toys. The savage blast of acceleration would snap their flimsy bodies like toothpicks.
"What places have you been to?" the earless one asked.
"Two years on Mars, one on Venus, one in the Belt, one on Neptune," Rolf recited. "I didn't like Neptune. It was best in the Belt; just our one ship, prospecting. We made a pile on Ceres--enough to buy out. I shot half of it on Neptune. Still have plenty left, but I don't know what I can do with it." He didn't add that he had come home puzzled, wondering why he was a Spacer instead of an Earther, condemned to live in filthy Spacertown when Yawk was just across the river.

They were looking at his shabby clothes, at the dirty brownstone hovel he lived in--an antique of a house four or five centuries old.
"You mean you're rich?" the Earther said.
"Sure," Rolf said. "Every Spacer is. So what? What can I spend it on? My money's banked on Mars and Venus. Thanks to the law I can't legally get it to Earth. So I live in Spacertown."
"Have you ever seen an Earther city?" the earless one asked, looking around at the quiet streets of Spacertown with big powerful men sitting idly in front of every house.
"I used to live in Yawk," Rolf said. "My grandmother was an Earther; she brought me up there. I haven't been back there since I left for space." They forced me out of Yawk, he thought. I'm not part of their species. Not one of them.

The two Earthers exchanged glances.
"Can we interest you in a suggestion?" They drew in their breath as if they expected to be knocked sprawling. Kanaday appeared at the door of the shack again.
"Rolf. Hey! You turning into an Earther? Get rid of them two cuties before there's trouble."
Rolf turned and saw a little knot of Spacers standing on the other side of the street, watching him with curiosity. He glared at them.
"I'll do whatever I damn well please," he shouted across.
He turned back to the two Earthers. "Now, what is it you want?"
"I'm giving a party next week," the earless one said. "I'd like you to come. We'd like to get the Spacer slant on life."
"Party?" Rolf repeated. "You mean, dancing, and games, and stuff like that?"
"You'll enjoy it," the Earther said coaxingly. "And we'd all love to have a real Spacer there."
"When is it?"
"A week."
"I have ten days left of my leave. All right," he said. "I'll come."

He accepted the Earther's card, looked at it mechanically, saw the name--Kal Quinton--and pocketed it. "Sure," he said. "I'll be there."

The Earthers moved toward their little jetcar, smiling gratefully. As Rolf crossed the street, the other Spacers greeted him with cold, puzzled stares.

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Kanaday was almost as tall as Rolf, and even uglier. Rolf's eyebrows were bold and heavy; Kanaday's, thick, contorted, bushy clumps of hair. Kanaday's nose had been broken long before in some barroom brawl; his cheekbones bulged; his face was strong and hard. More important, his left foot was twisted and gnarled beyond hope of redemption by the most skillful surgeon. He had been crippled in a jet explosion three years before, and was of no use to the Spacelines any more. They had pensioned him off. Part of the deal was the dilapidated old house in Spacertown which he operated as a boarding-house for transient Spacers.

"What do you want to do that for?" Kanaday asked. "Haven't those Earthers pushed you around enough, so you have to go dance at one of their wild parties?"

"Leave me alone," Rolf muttered.

"You like this filth you live in? Spacertown is just a ghetto, that's all. The Earthers have pushed you right into the muck. You're not even a human being to them--just some sort of trained ape. And now you're going to go and entertain them. I thought you had brains, Rolf!"

"Shut up!" He dashed his glass against the table; it bounced off and dropped to the floor, where it shattered.

Kanaday's girl Laney entered the room at the sound of the crash. She was tall and powerful-looking, with straight black hair and the strong cheekbones that characterized the Spacers. Immediately she stooped and began shoveling up the broken glass.

"That wasn't smart, Rolf," she said. "That'll cost you half a credit. Wasn't worth it, was it?"

Rolf laid the coin on the edge of the table. "Tell your pal to shut up, then. If he doesn't stop icing me I'll fix his other foot for him and you can buy him a dolly."

She looked from one to the other. "What's bothering you two now?"

"A couple of Earthers were here this morning," Kanaday said. "Slumming. They took a fancy to our young friend here and invited him to one of their parties. He accepted."

"He what? Don't go, Rolf. You're crazy to go."

"Why am I crazy?" He tried to control his voice. "Why should we keep ourselves apart from the Earthers? Why shouldn't the two races get together?"

* * * * *

She put down her tray and sat next to him. "They're more than two races," she said patiently. "Earther and Spacer are two different species, Rolf. Carefully, genetically separated. They're small and weak, we're big and powerful. You've been bred for going to space; they're the castoffs, the ones who were too weak to go. The line between the two groups is too strong to break."

"And they treat us like dirt--like animals," Kanaday said. "But they're the dirt. They were the ones who couldn't make it."

"Don't go to the party," Laney said. "They just want to make fun of you. Look at the big ape, they'll say."

Rolf stood up. "You don't understand. Neither of you does. I'm part Earther," Rolf said. "My grandmother on my mother's side. She raised me as an Earther. She wanted me to be an Earther. But I kept getting bigger and uglier all the time. She took me to a plastic surgeon once, figuring he could make me look like an Earther. He was a little man; I don't know what he looked like to start with but some other surgeon had made him clean-cut and straight-nosed and thin-lipped like all the other Earthers. I was bigger than he was--twice as big, and I was only fifteen. He looked at me and felt my bones and measured me. 'Healthy little ape'--those were the words he used. He told my grandmother I'd get bigger and bigger, that no amount of surgery could make me small and handsome, that I was fit only for space and didn't belong in Yawk. So I left for space the next morning."

"I see," Laney said quietly.

"I didn't say good-bye. I just left. There was no place for me in Yawk; I couldn't pass myself off as an Earther any more. But I'd like to go back and see what the old life was like, now that I know what it's like to be on the other side for a while."

"It'll hurt when you find out, Rolf."

"I'll take that chance. But I want to go. Maybe my grandmother'll be there. The surgeons made her young and
pretty again every few years; she looked like my sister when I left.”

Laney nodded her head. "There's no point arguing with him, Kanaday. He has to go back there and find out, so let him alone."

Rolf smiled. "Thanks for understanding." He took out Quinton's card and turned it over and over in his hand.

Rolf went to Yawk on foot, dressed in his best clothes, with his face as clean as it had been in some years. Spacertown was just across the river from Yawk, and the bridges spanning the river were bright and gleaming in the mid-afternoon sun.

The bombs had landed on Yawk during the long-forgotten war, but somehow they had spared the sprawling borough across the river. And so Yawk had been completely rebuilt, once the radioactivity had been purged from the land, while what was now Spacertown consisted mostly of buildings that dated back to the Twentieth Century.

Yawk had been the world's greatest seaport; now it was the world's greatest spaceport. The sky was thick with incoming and outgoing liners. The passengers on the ship usually stayed at Yawk, which had become an even greater metropolis than it had been before the Bomb. The crew crossed the river to Spacertown, where they could find their own kind.

Yawk and Spacertown were like two separate planets. There were three bridges spanning the river, but most of the time they went unused, except by spacemen going back home or by spacemen going to the spaceport for embarkation. There was no regular transportation between the two cities; to get from Spacertown to Yawk, you could borrow a jetcar or you could walk. Rolf walked.

He enjoyed the trip. I'm going back home, he thought as he paced along the gleaming arc of the bridge, dressed in his Sunday best. He remembered the days of his own childhood, his parentless childhood. His earliest memory was of a fight at the age of six or so. He had stood off what seemed like half the neighborhood, ending the battle by picking up an older bully, much feared by everyone, and heaving him over a fence. When he told his grandmother about the way he had won the fight she cried for an hour, and never told him why. But they had never picked on him again, though he knew the other boys had jeered at him behind his back as he grew bigger and bigger over the years. "Ape," they called him. "Ape."

But never to his face.

He approached the Yawk end of the bridge. A guard was waiting there—an Earther guard, small and frail, but with a sturdy-looking blaster at his hip.

"Going back, Spacer?"

Rolf started. How did the guard know? And then he realized that all the guard meant was, are you going back to your ship?

"No. No, I'm going to a party. Kal Quinton's house."

"Tell me another, Spacer." The guard's voice was light and derisive. A swift poke in the ribs would break him in half, Rolf thought.

"I'm serious. Quinton invited me. Here's his card."

"If this is a joke it'll mean trouble. But go ahead; I'll take your word for it."

Rolf marched on past the guard, almost nonchalantly. He looked at the address on the card. 12406 Kenman Road. He rooted around in his fading memory of Yawk, but he found the details had blurred under the impact of five years of Mars and Venus and the Belt and Neptune. He did not know where Kenman Road was.

The glowing street signs were not much help either. One said 287th Street and the other said 72nd Avenue. Kenman Road might be anywhere.

He walked on a block or two. The streets were antiseptically clean, and he had the feeling that his boots, which had lately trod in Spacertown, were leaving dirtmarks along the street. He did not look back to see.

He looked at his wristchron. It was getting late, and Kenman Road might be anywhere. He turned into a busy thoroughfare, conscious that he was attracting attention. The streets here were crowded with little people who barely reached his chest; they were all about the same height, and most of them looked alike. A few had had radical surgical alterations, and every one of these was different. One had a unicorn-like horn; another, an extra eye which cunningly resembled his real ones. The Earthers were looking at him furtively, as they would at a tiger or an elephant strolling down a main street.

"Where are you going, Spacer?" said a voice from the middle of the street.

Rolf's first impulse was to snarl out a curse and keep moving, but he realized that the question was a good one and one whose answer he was trying to find out for himself. He turned.

Another policeman stood on the edge of the walkway. "Are you lost?" The policeman was short and delicate-looking.
Rolf produced his card.  
The policeman studied it. "What business do you have with Quinton?"

"Just tell me how to get there," Rolf said. "I'm in a hurry."

The policeman backed up a step. "All right, take it easy." He pointed to a kiosk. "Take the subcar here. There's a stop at Kenman Road. You can find your way from there."

"I'd rather walk it," Rolf said. He did not want to have to stand the strain of riding in a subcar with a bunch of curious staring Earthers.

"Fine with me," the policeman said. "It's about two hundred blocks to the north. Got a good pair of legs?"

"Never mind," Rolf said. "I'll take the subcar."

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Kenman Road was a quiet little street in an expensive-looking end of Yawk. 12406 was a towering building which completely overshadowed everything else on the street. As Rolf entered the door, a perfumed little Earther with a flashing diamond where his left eye should have been and a skin stained bright purple appeared from nowhere.

"We've been waiting for you. Come on; Kal will be delighted that you're here."

The elevator zoomed up so quickly that Rolf thought for a moment that he was back in space. But it stopped suddenly at the 62nd floor, and, as the door swung open, the sounds of wild revelry drifted down the hall. Rolf had a brief moment of doubt when he pictured Laney and Kanaday at this very moment, playing cards in their mouldering hovel while he walked down this plastiline corridor back into a world he had left behind.

Quinton came out into the hall to greet him. Rolf recognized him by the missing ears; his skin was now a subdued blue to go with his orange robe.

"I'm so glad you came," the little Earther bubbled. "Come on in and I'll introduce you to everyone."

The door opened photoelectrically as they approached. Quinton seized him by the hand and dragged him in. There was the sound of laughter and of shouting. As he entered it all stopped, suddenly, as if it had been shut off. Rolf stared at them quizzically from under his lowering brows, and they looked at him with ill-concealed curiosity.

They seemed divided into two groups. Clustered at one end of the long hall was a group of Earthers who seemed completely identical, all with the same features, looking like so many dolls in a row. These were the Earthers he remembered, the ones whom the plastic surgeons had hacked at and hewn until they all conformed to the prevailing concept of beauty.

Then at the other end was a different group. They were all different. Some had glittering jewels set in their foreheads, others had no lips, no hair, extra eyes, three nostrils. They were a weird and frightening group, highest product of the plastic surgeon's art.

Both groups were staring silently at Rolf.

"Friends, this is Rolf--Rolf--"

"Dekker," Rolf said after a pause. He had almost forgotten his own last name.

"Rolf Dekker, just back from outer space. I've invited him to join us tonight. I think you'll enjoy meeting him."

The stony silence slowly dissolved into murmurs of polite conversation as the party-goers adjusted to the presence of the newcomer. They seemed to be discussing the matter earnestly among themselves, as if Quinton had done something unheard-of by bringing a Spacer into an Earther party.

A tall girl with blonde hair drifted up to him.

"Ah. Jonne," Quinton said. He turned to Rolf. "This is Jonne. She asked to be your companion at the party. She's very interested in space and things connected with it."

Things connected with it, Rolf thought. Meaning me. He looked at her. She was as tall an Earther as he had yet seen, and probably suffered for it when there were no Spacers around. Furthermore, he suspected, her height was accentuated for the evening by special shoes. She was not of the Individ persuasion, because her face was well-shaped, with smooth, even features, with no individualist distortion. Her skin was unstained. She wore a clinging off-the-breast tunic. Quite a dish, Rolf decided. He began to see that he might enjoy this party.

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The other guests began to approach timidly, now that the initial shock of his presence had worn off. They asked silly little questions about space--questions which showed that they had only a superficial interest in him and were treating him as a sort of talking dog. He answered as many as he could, looking down at their little painted faces with concealed contempt.

They think as little of me as I do of them. The thought hit him suddenly and his broad face creased in a smile at the irony. Then the music started.

* * * * *

The knot of Earthers slowly broke up and drifted away to dance. He looked at Jonne, who had stood patiently at
his side through all this.

"I don't dance," he said. "I never learned how." He watched the other couples moving gracefully around the floor, looking for all the world like an assemblage of puppets. He stared in the dim light, watching the couples clinging to each other as they rocked through the motions of the dance. He stood against the wall, wearing his ugliness like a shield. He saw the great gulf which separated him from the Earthers spreading before him, as he watched the dancers and the gay chatter and the empty badinage and the furtive hand-holding, and everything else from which he was cut off. The bizarre Individs were dancing together--he noticed one man putting an extra arm to full advantage--and the almost identical Conforms had formed their own group again. Rolf wondered how they told each other apart when they all looked alike.

"Come on," Jonne said. "I'll show you how to dance." He turned to look at her, with her glossy blonde hair and even features. She smiled prettily, revealing white teeth. Probably newly purchased? Rolf wondered.

"Actually I do know how to dance," Rolf said. "But I do it so badly--"

"That doesn't matter," she said gaily. "Come on."

She took his arm. Maybe she doesn't think I look like an ape, he thought. She doesn't treat me the way the others do. But why am I so ugly, and why is she so pretty?

He looked at her and she looked at him, and he felt her glance on his stubbly face with its ferocious teeth and burning yellowish eyes. He didn't want her to see him at all; he wished he had no face.

He folded her in his arms, feeling her warmth radiate through him. She was very tall, he realized, almost as tall as a Spacer woman--but with none of the harsh ruggedness of the women of Spacertown. They danced, she well, he clumsily. When the music stopped she guided him to the entrance of a veranda.

They walked outside into the cool night air. The lights of the city obscured most of the stars, but a few still showed, and the moon hung high above Yawk. He could dimly make out the lights of Spacertown across the river, and he thought again of Laney and Kanaday and wished Kanaday could see him now with this beautiful Earther next to him.

"You must get lonely in space," she said after a while.

"I do," he said, trying to keep his voice gentle. "But it's where I belong. I'm bred for it."

She nodded. "Yes. And any of those so-called men inside would give ten years of his life to be able to go to space. But yet you say it's lonely."

* * * * *

"Those long rides through the night," he said. "They get you down. You want to be back among people. So you come back. You come back. And what do you come back to?"

"I know," she said softly. "I've seen Spacertown."

"Why must it be that way?" he demanded. "Why are Spacers so lucky and so wretched all at once?"

"Let's not talk about it now," she said.

I'd like to kiss her, he thought. But my face is rough, and I'm rough and ugly, and she'd push me away. I remember the pretty little Earther girls who ran laughing away from me when I was thirteen and fourteen, before I went to space.

"You don't have to be lonely," she said. One of her perfect eyebrows lifted just a little. "Maybe someday you'll find someone who cares, Rolf. Someday, maybe."

"Yeah," he said. "Someday, maybe." But he knew it was all wrong. Could he bring this girl to Spacertown with him? No; she must be merely playing a game, looking for an evening's diversion. Something new: make love to a Spacer.

They fell silent and he watched her again, and she watched him. He heard her breath rising and falling evenly, not at all like his own thick gasps. After a while he stepped close to her, put his arm around her, tilted her head into the crook of his elbow, bent, and kissed her.

As he did it, he saw he was botching it just like everything else. He had come too close, and his heavy boot was pressing on the tip of her shoe; and he had not quite landed square on her lips. But still, he was close to her. He was reluctant to break it up, but he felt she was only half-responding, not giving anything of herself while he had given all. He drew back a step.

She did not have time to hide the expression of distaste that involuntarily crossed her face. He watched the expression on her face as she realized the kiss was over. He watched her silently.

"Someday, maybe," he said. She stared at him, not hiding the fear that was starting to grow on her face.

He felt a cold chill deep in his stomach, and it grew until it passed through his throat and into his head.

"Yeah," he said. "Someday, maybe. But not you. Not anyone who's just playing games. That's all--you want something to tell your friends about, that's why you volunteered for tonight's assignment. It's all you can do to keep from laughing at me, but you're sticking to it. I don't want any of it, hear me? Get away."
She stepped back a pace. "You ugly, clumsy clown. You ape!" Tears began to spoil the flawless mask of her face. Blinded with anger, he grabbed roughly for her arm, but she broke away and dashed back inside.

She was trying to collect me, he thought. Her hobby: interesting dates. She wanted to add me to her collection. An Experience. Calmly he walked to the end of the veranda and stared off into the night, choking his rage. He watched the moon making its dead ride across the sky, and stared at the sprinkling of stars. The night was empty and cold, he thought, finally. But not more so than I.

* * * * *

He turned and looked back through the half-opened window. He saw a girl who looked almost like her, but was not tall enough and wore a different dress. Then he spotted her. She was dancing with one of the Conforms, a frail-looking man a few inches shorter than she, with regular, handsome features. She laughed at some sly joke, and he laughed with her.

Rolf watched the moon for a moment more, thinking of Laney's warning. They just want to make fun of you. Look at the big ape, they'll say.

He knew he had to get out of there immediately. He was a Spacer, and they were Earthers, and he scorned them for being contemptuous little dolls, and they laughed at him for being a hulking ape. He was not a member of their species; he was not part of their world.

He went inside. Kal Quinton came rushing up to him.

"I'm going," Rolf said.

"What? You don't mean that," the little man said. "Why, the party's scarcely gotten under way, and there are dozens of people who want to meet you. And you'll miss the big show if you don't stay."

"I've already seen the big show," Rolf told him. "I want out. Now."

"You can't leave now," Quinton said. Rolf thought he saw tears in the corners of the little man's eyes. "Please don't leave. I've told everyone you'd be here--you'll disgrace me."

"What do I care? Let me out of here." Rolf started to move toward the door. Quinton attempted to push him back.

"Just a minute, Rolf. Please!"

"I have to get out," he said. He knocked Quinton out of his way with a backhand swipe of his arm and dashed down the hall frantically, looking for the elevator.

* * * * *

Laney and Kanaday were sitting up waiting for him when he got back, early in the morning. He slung himself into a pneumochair and unsealed his boots, releasing his cramped, tired feet.

"Well," Laney asked. "How was the party?"

"You have fun among the Earthers, Rolf?"

He said nothing.

"It couldn't have been that bad," Laney said.

Rolf looked up at her. "I'm leaving space. I'm going to go to a surgeon and have him turn me into an Earther. I hate this filthy life!"

"He's drunk," Kanaday said.

"No, I'm not drunk," Rolf retorted. "I don't want to be an ape any more."

"Is that what you are? If you're an ape, what are they to you? Monkeys?" Kanaday laughed harshly.

"Are they really so wonderful?" Laney asked. "Does the life appeal to you so much that you'll give up space for it? Do you admire the Earthers so much?"

* * * * *

She's got me, Rolf thought. I hate Spacertown, but will I like Yawk any better? Do I really want to become one of those little puppets? But there's nothing left in space for me. At least the Earthers are happy.

I wish she wouldn't look at me that way. "Leave me alone," he snarled. "I'll do whatever I want to do." Laney was staring at him, trying to poke behind his mask of anger. He looked at her wide shoulders, her muscular frame, her unbeautiful hair and rugged face, and compared it with Jonne's clinging grace, her flowing gold hair.

He picked up his boots and stomped up to bed.

* * * * *

The surgeon's name was Goldring, and he was a wiry, intense man who had prevailed on one of his colleagues to give him a tiny slit of a mouth. He sat behind a shining plastiline desk, waiting patiently until Rolf finished talking.

"It can't be done," he said at last. "Plastic surgeons can do almost anything, but I can't turn you into an Earther. It's not just a matter of chopping eight or ten inches out of your legs; I'd have to alter your entire bone structure or you'd be a hideous misproportioned monstrosity. And it can't be done. I can't build you a whole new body from
scratch, and if I could do it you wouldn't be able to afford it."

Rolf stamped his foot impatiently. "You're the third surgeon who's given me the same line. What is this--a conspiracy? I see what you can do. If you can graft a third arm onto somebody, you can turn me into an Earther."

"Please, Mr. Dekker. I've told you I can't. But I don't understand why you want such a change. Hardly a week goes by without some Yawk boy coming to me and asking to be turned into a Spacer, and I have to refuse him for the same reasons I'm refusing you! That's the usual course of events--the romantic Earther boy wanting to go to space, and not being able to."

An idea hit Rolf. "Was one of them Kal Quinton?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dekker. I just can't divulge any such information."

Rolf shot his arm across the desk and grasped the surgeon by the throat. "Answer me!

"Yes," the surgeon gasped. "Quinton asked me for such an operation. Almost everyone wants one."

"And you can't do it?" Rolf asked.

"Of course not. I've told you: the amount of work needed to turn Earther into Spacer or Spacer into Earther is inconceivable. It'll never be done."

"I guess that's definite, then," Rolf said, slumping a little in disappointment. "But there's nothing to prevent you from giving me a new face--from taking away this face and replacing it with something people can look at without shuddering."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Dekker," the surgeon said.

"I know that! Can't you see it--I'm ugly! Why? Why should I look this way?"

"Please calm down, Mr. Dekker. You don't seem to realize that you're a perfectly normal-looking Spacer. You were bred to look this way. It's your genetic heritage. Space is not a thing for everyone; only men with extraordinary bone structure can withstand acceleration. The first men were carefully selected and bred. You see the result of five centuries of this sort of breeding. The sturdy, heavy-boned Spacers--you, Mr. Dekker, and your friends--are the only ones who are fit to travel in space. The others, the weaklings like myself, the little people, resort to plastic surgery to compensate for their deficiency. For a while the trend was to have everyone conform to a certain standard of beauty; if we couldn't be strong, we could at least be handsome. Lately a new theory of individualism has sprung up, and now we strive for original forms in our bodies. This is all because size and strength has been bred out of us and given to you."

"I know all this," Rolf said. "Why can't you--"

"Why can't I peel away your natural face and make you look like an Earther? There's no reason why; it would be a simple operation. But who would you fool? Why can't you be grateful for what you are? You can go to Mars, while we can merely look at it. If I gave you a new face, it would cut you off from both sides. The Earthers would still know you were a Spacer, and I'm sure the other Spacers would immediately cease to associate with you."

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"Who are you to say? You're not supposed to pass judgment on whether an operation should be performed, or you wouldn't pull out people's eyes and stick diamonds in!"

"It's not that, Mr. Dekker." The surgeon folded and unfolded his hands in impatience. "You must realize that you are what you are. Your appearance is a social norm, and for acceptance in your social environment you must continue to appear, well, perhaps, shall I say apelike?"

It was as bad a word as the surgeon could have chosen.

"Ape! Ape, am I! I'll show you who's an ape!" Rolf yelled, all the accumulated frustration of the last two days suddenly bursting loose. He leaped up and overturned the desk. Dr. Goldring hastily jumped backwards as the heavy desk crashed into the wall. A startled nurse dashed into the office, saw the situation, and immediately ran out.

"Give me your instruments! I'll operate on myself!" He knocked Goldring against the wall, pulled down a costly solidograph from the wall and kicked it at him, and crashed through into the operating room, where he began overturning tables and heaving chairs through glass shelves.

"I'll show you," he said. He cracked an instrument case and took out a delicate knife with a near-microscopic edge. He bent it in half and threw the crumpled wreckage away. Wildly he destroyed everything he could, raging from one end of the room to the other, ripping down furnishings, smashing, destroying, while Dr. Goldring stood at the door and yelled for help.

It was not long in coming. An army of Earther policemen erupted into the room and confronted him as he stood panting amid the wreckage. They were all short men, but there must have been twenty of them.

"Don't shoot him," someone called. And then they advanced in a body.

He picked up the operating table and hurled it at them. Three policemen crumbled under it, but the rest kept coming. He batted them away like insects, but they surrounded him and piled on. For a few moments he struggled under the load of fifteen small men, punching and kicking and yelling. He burst loose for an instant, but two of them
were clinging to his legs and he hit the floor with a crash. They were on him immediately, and he stopped struggling after a while.

* * * * *

The next thing he knew he was lying sprawled on the floor of his room in Spacertown, breathing dust out of the tattered carpet. He was a mass of cuts and bruises, and he knew they must have given him quite a going-over. He was sore from head to foot.

So they hadn't arrested him. No, of course not; no more than they would arrest any wild animal who went berserk. They had just dumped him back in the jungle. He tried to get up, but couldn't make it. Quite a going-over it must have been. Nothing seemed broken, but everything was slightly bent.

"Satisfied now?" said a voice from somewhere. It was a pleasant sound to hear, a voice, and he let the mere noise of it soak into his mind. "Now that you've proved to everyone that you really are just an ape?"

He twisted his neck around--slowly, because his neck was stiff and sore. Laney was sitting on the edge of his bed with two suitcases next to her.

"It really wasn't necessary to run wild there," she said. "The Earthers all knew you were just an animal anyway. You didn't have to prove it so violently."

"Okay, Laney. Quit it."

"If you want me to. I just wanted to make sure you knew what had happened. A gang of Earther cops brought you back a while ago and dumped you here. They told me the story."

"Leave me alone."

"You've been telling everyone that all along, Rolf. Look where it got you. A royal beating at the hands of a bunch of Earthers. Now that they've thrown you out for the last time, has it filtered into your mind that this is where you belong?"

"In Spacertown?"

"Only between trips. You belong in space, Rolf. No surgeon can make you an Earther. The Earthers are dead, but they don't know it yet. All their parties, their fancy clothes, their extra arms and missing ears--that means they're decadent. They're finished. You're the one who's alive; the whole universe is waiting for you to go out and step on its neck. And instead you want to turn yourself into a green-skinned little monkey! Why?"

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He pulled himself to a sitting position. "I don't know," he said. "I've been all mixed up, I think." He felt his powerful arm. "I'm a Spacer." Suddenly he glanced at her. "What are the suitcases for?" he said.

"I'm moving in," Laney said. "I need a place to sleep."

"What's the matter with Kanaday? Did he get tired of listening to you preaching? He's my friend, Laney; I'm not going to do him dirt."

"He's dead, Rolf. When the Earther cops came here to bring you back, and he saw what they did to you, his hatred overflowed. He always hated Earthers, and he hated them even more for the way you were being tricked into thinking they were worth anything. He got hold of one of those cops and just about twisted him into two pieces. They blasted him."

Rolf was silent. He let his head sink down on his knees.

"So I moved down here. It's lonely upstairs now. Come on; I'll help you get up."

She walked toward him, hooked her hand under his arm, and half-dragged, half-pushed him to his feet. Her touch was firm, and there was no denying the strength behind her.

"I have to get fixed up," he said abruptly. "My leave's up in two days. I have to get out of here. We're shipping for Pluto."

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He rocked unsteadily on his feet. "It'll really get lonely here then," he said.

"Are you really going to go? Or are you going to find some jack-surgeon who'll make your face pretty for a few dirty credits?"

"Stop it. I mean it. I'm going. I'll be gone on this signup. By then I'll have enough cash piled up on various planets to be a rich man. I'll get it all together and get a mansion on Venus, and have Greenie slaves."

It was getting toward noon. The sun, high in the sky, burst through the shutters and lit up the dingy room.

"I'll stay here," Laney said. "You're going to Pluto?"

He nodded.

"Kanaday was supposed to be going to Pluto. He was heading there when that explosion finished his foot. He never got there after that."

"Poor old Kanaday," Rolf said.

"I'll miss him too. I guess I'll have to run the boarding-house now. For a while. Will you come back here when
"I suppose so," Rolf said without looking up. "This town is no worse than any of the other Spacertowns. No better, but no worse." He slowly lifted his head and looked at her as she stood there facing him.

"I hope you come back," she said.

The sun was coming in from behind her, now, and lighting her up. She was rugged, all right, and strong: a good hard worker. And she was well built. Suddenly his aches became less painful, as he looked at her and realized that she was infinitely more beautiful than the slick, glossy-looking girl he had kissed on the veranda, who had bought her teeth at a store and had gotten her figure from a surgeon. Laney, at least, was real.

"You know," he said at last, "I think I have an idea. You wait here and I'll come get you when my year's up. I'll have enough to pay passage to Venus for two. We can get a slightly smaller mansion than I planned on getting. But we can get it. Some parts of Venus are beautiful. And the closest those monkeys from Yawk can get to it is to look at it in the night sky. You think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's a great idea," she said, moving toward him. Her head was nearly as high as his own.

"I'll go back to space. I have to, to keep my rating. But you'll wait for me, won't you?"

"I'll wait."

And as he drew her close, he knew she meant it.

THE END

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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 was 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 blurting 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 engrained 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 terrific 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 treadmill.

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 homely, 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 tessellated 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 hydrophinae 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 crumple 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 curbstone. 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 composure.

* * * * *

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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**Contents**

**THE DELEGATE FROM VENUS**

By HENRY SLESAR

Everybody was waiting to see what the delegate from Venus looked like. And all they got for their patience was the biggest surprise since David clobbered Goliath.

"Let me put it this way," Conners said paternally. "We expect a certain amount of decorum from our Washington news correspondents, and that's all I'm asking for."

Jerry Bridges, sitting in the chair opposite his employer's desk, chewed on his knuckles and said nothing. One part of his mind wanted him to play it cagey, to behave the way the newspaper wanted him to behave, to protect the cozy Washington assignment he had waited four years to get. But another part of him, a rebel part, wanted him to stay on the trail of the story he felt sure was about to break.

"I didn't mean to make trouble, Mr. Conners," he said casually. "It just seemed strange, all these exchanges of couriers in the past two days. I couldn't help thinking something was up."

"Even if that's true, we'll hear about it through the usual channels," Conners frowned. "But getting a senator's secretary drunk to obtain information--well, that's not only indiscreet, Bridges. It's downright dirty."

Jerry grinned. "I didn't take that kind of advantage, Mr. Conners. Not that she wasn't a toothsome little dish ..."

"Just thank your lucky stars that it didn't go any further. And from now on--" He wagged a finger at him.

"Watch your step."

Jerry got up and ambled to the door. But he turned before leaving and said:

"By the way. What do you think is going on?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Don't kid me, Mr. Conners. Think it's war?"

"That'll be all, Bridges."

* * * * *

The reporter closed the door behind him, and then strolled out of the building into the sunlight.

He met Ruskin, the fat little AP correspondent, in front of the Pan-American Building on Constitution Avenue. Ruskin was holding the newspaper that contained the gossip-column item which had started the whole affair, and he seemed more interested in the romantic rather than political implications. As he walked beside him, he said:

"So what really happened, pal? That Greta babe really let down her hair?"

"Where's your decorum?" Jerry growled.
Ruskin giggled. "Boy, she's quite a dame, all right. I think they ought to get the Secret Service to guard her. She really fills out a size 10, don't she?"

"Ruskin," Jerry said, "you have a low mind. For a week, this town has been acting like the 39 Steps, and all you can think about is dames. What's the matter with you? Where will you be when the big mushroom cloud comes?"

"With Greta, I hope," Ruskin sighed. "What a way to get radioactive."

They split off a few blocks later, and Jerry walked until he came to the Red Tape Bar & Grill, a favorite hangout of the local journalists. There were three other newsmen at the bar, and they gave him snickering greetings. He took a small table in the rear and ate his meal in sullen silence.

It wasn't the newsmen's jibes that bothered him; it was the certainty that something of major importance was happening in the capitol. There had been hourly conferences at the White House, flying visits by State Department officials, mysterious conferences involving members of the Science Commission. So far, the byword had been secrecy. They knew that Senator Spocker, chairman of the Congressional Science Committee, had been involved in every meeting, but Senator Spocker was unavailable. His secretary, however, was a little more obliging ...  

Jerry looked up from his coffee and blinked when he saw who was coming through the door of the Bar & Grill. So did every other patron, but for different reasons. Greta Johnson had that effect upon men. Even the confining effect of a mannishly-tailored suit didn't hide her outrageously feminine qualities.

She walked straight to his table, and he stood up.

"They told me you might be here," she said, breathing hard. "I just wanted to thank you for last night."

"Look, Greta--"

Wham! Her hand, small and delicate, felt like a slab of lead when it slammed into his cheek. She left a bruise five fingers wide, and then turned and stalked out.

* * * * *

He ran after her, the restaurant proprietor shouting about the unpaid bill. It took a rapid dog-trot to reach her side.

"Greta, listen!" he panted. "You don't understand about last night. It wasn't the way that lousy columnist said--" She stopped in her tracks.

"I wouldn't have minded so much if you'd gotten me drunk. But to use me, just to get a story--"

"But I'm a reporter, damn it. It's my job. I'd do it again if I thought you knew anything."

She was pouting now. "Well, how do you suppose I feel, knowing you're only interested in me because of the Senator? Anyway, I'll probably lose my job, and then you won't have any use for me."

"Good-bye, Greta," Jerry said sadly.

"What?"

"Good-bye. I suppose you won't want to see me any more."

"Did I say that?"

"It just won't be any use. We'll always have this thing between us."

She looked at him for a moment, and then touched his bruised cheek with a tender, motherly gesture.

"Your poor face," she murmured, and then sighed. "Oh, well. I guess there's no use fighting it. Maybe if I did tell you what I know, we could act human again."

"Greta!"

"But if you print one word of it, Jerry Bridges, I'll never speak to you again!"

"Honey," Jerry said, taking her arm, "you can trust me like a brother."

"That's not the idea," Greta said stiffly.

In a secluded booth at the rear of a restaurant unfrequented by newsmen, Greta leaned forward and said:

"At first, they thought it was another sputnik."

"Who did?"

"The State Department, silly. They got reports from the observatories about another sputnik being launched by the Russians. Only the Russians denied it. Then there were joint meetings, and nobody could figure out what the damn thing was."

"Wait a minute," Jerry said dizzily. "You mean to tell me there's another of those metal moons up there?"

"But it's not a moon. That's the big point. It's a spaceship."

"A what?"

"A spaceship," Greta said coolly, sipping lemonade. "They have been in contact with it now for about three days, and they're thinking of calling a plenary session of the UN just to figure out what to do about it. The only hitch is, Russia doesn't want to wait that long, and is asking for a hurry-up summit meeting to make a decision."

"A decision about what?"

"About the Venusians, of course."
"Greta," Jerry said mildly, "I think you're still a little woozy from last night."

"Don't be silly. The spaceship's from Venus; they've already established that. And the people on it--I guess they're people--want to know if they can land their delegate."

"Their what?"

"Their delegate. They came here for some kind of conference, I guess. They know about the UN and everything, and they want to take part. They say that with all the satellites being launched, that our affairs are their affairs, too. It's kind of confusing, but that's what they say."

"You mean these Venusians speak English?"

"And Russian. And French. And German. And everything I guess. They've been having radio talks with practically every country for the past three days. Like I say, they want to establish diplomatic relations or something. The Senator thinks that if we don't agree, they might do something drastic, like blow us all up. It's kind of scary." She shivered delicately.

"You're taking it mighty calm," he said ironically.

"Well, how else can I take it? I'm not even supposed to know about it, except that the Senator is so careless about--" She put her fingers to her lips. "Oh, dear, now you'll really think I'm terrible."

"Terrible? I think you're wonderful!"

"And you promise not to print it?"

"Didn't I say I wouldn't?"

"Y-e-s. But you know, you're a liar sometimes, Jerry. I've noticed that about you."

* * * * *

The press secretary's secretary, a massive woman with gray hair and impervious to charm, guarded the portals of his office with all the indomitable will of the U. S. Marines. But Jerry Bridges tried.

"You don't understand, Lana," he said. "I don't want to see Mr. Howells. I just want you to give him something."

"My name's not Lana, and I can't deliver any messages."

"But this is something he wants to see." He handed her an envelope, stamped URGENT. "Do it for me, Hedy. And I'll buy you the flashiest pair of diamond earrings in Washington."

"Well," the woman said, thawing slightly. "I could deliver it with his next batch of mail."

"When will that be?"

"In an hour. He's in a terribly important meeting right now."

"You've got some mail right there. Earrings and a bracelet to match."

She looked at him with exasperation, and then gathered up a stack of memorandums and letters, his own envelope atop it. She came out of the press secretary's office two minutes later with Howells himself, and Howells said: "You there, Bridges. Come in here."

"Yes, sir!" Jerry said, breezing by the waiting reporters with a grin of triumph.

There were six men in the room, three in military uniform. Howells poked the envelope towards Jerry, and snapped:

"This note of yours. Just what do you think it means?"

"You know better than I do, Mr. Howells. I'm just doing my job; I think the public has a right to know about this spaceship that's flying around--"

"Mr. Bridges, you don't make it easy for us. It's our opinion that secrecy is essential, that leakage of the story might cause panic. Since you're the only unauthorized person who knows of it, we have two choices. One of them is to lock you up."

Jerry swallowed hard.

"The other is perhaps more practical," Howells said. "You'll be taken into our confidence, and allowed to accompany those officials who will be admitted to the landing site. But you will not be allowed to relay the story to the press until such a time as all correspondents are informed. That won't give you a 'scoop' if that's what you call it, but you'll be an eyewitness. That should be worth something."

"It's worth a lot," Jerry said eagerly. "Thanks, Mr. Howells."

"Don't thank me, I'm not doing you any personal favor. Now about the landing tonight--"

"You mean the spaceship's coming down?"

"Yes. A special foreign ministers conference was held this morning, and a decision was reached to accept the delegate. Landing instructions are being given at Los Alamos, and the ship will presumably land around midnight tonight. There will be a jet leaving Washington Airport at nine, and you'll be on it. Meanwhile, consider yourself in
custody."

* * * * *

The USAF jet transport wasn't the only secrecy-shrouded aircraft that took off that evening from Washington Airport. But Jerry Bridges, sitting in the rear seat flanked by two Sphinx-like Secret Service men, knew that he was the only passenger with non-official status aboard.

It was only a few minutes past ten when they arrived at the air base at Los Alamos. The desert sky was cloudy and starless, and powerful searchlights probed the thick cumulus. There were sleek, purring black autos waiting to rush the air passengers to some unnamed destination. They drove for twenty minutes across a flat ribbon of desert road, until Jerry sighted what appeared to be a circle of newly-erected lights in the middle of nowhere. On the perimeter, official vehicles were parked in orderly rows, and four USAF trailer trucks were in evidence, their radarscopes turning slowly. There was activity everywhere, but it was well-ordered and unhurried. They had done a good job of keeping the excitement contained.

He was allowed to leave the car and stroll unescorted. He tried to talk to some of the scurrying officials, but to no avail. Finally, he contented himself by sitting on the sand, his back against the grill of a staff car, smoking one cigarette after another.

As the minutes ticked off, the activity became more frenetic around him. Then the pace slowed, and he knew the appointed moment was approaching. Stillness returned to the desert, and tension was a tangible substance in the night air.

The radarscopes spun slowly.
The searchlights converged in an intricate pattern.
Then the clouds seemed to part!
"Here she comes!" a voice shouted. And in a moment, the calm was shattered. At first, he saw nothing. A faint roar was started in the heavens, and it became a growl that increased in volume until even the shouting voices could no longer be heard. Then the crisscrossing lights struck metal, glancing off the gleaming body of a descending object. Larger and larger the object grew, until it assumed the definable shape of a squat silver funnel, falling in a perfect straight line towards the center of the light-ringed area. When it hit, a dust cloud obscured it from sight.

* * * * *

A loudspeaker blared out an unintelligible order, but its message was clear. No one moved from their position.

Finally, a three-man team, asbestos-clad, lead-shielded, stepped out from the ring of spectators. They carried geiger counters on long poles before them.

Jerry held his breath as they approached the object; only when they were yards away did he appreciate its size. It wasn't large; not more than fifteen feet in total circumference.

One of the three men waved a gloved hand.
"It's okay," a voice breathed behind him. "No radiation ..."

Slowly, the ring of spectators closed tighter. They were twenty yards from the ship when the voice spoke to them.

"Greetings from Venus," it said, and then repeated the phrase in six languages. "The ship you see is a Venusian Class 7 interplanetary rocket, built for one-passenger. It is clear of all radiation, and is perfectly safe to approach. There is a hatch which may be opened by an automatic lever in the side. Please open this hatch and remove the passenger."

An Air Force General whom Jerry couldn't identify stepped forward. He circled the ship warily, and then said something to the others. They came closer, and he touched a small lever on the silvery surface of the funnel.

A door slid open.
"It's a box!" someone said.
"A crate--"
"Colligan! Moore! Schaffer! Lend a hand here--"

A trio came forward and hoisted the crate out of the ship. Then the voice spoke again; Jerry deduced that it must have been activated by the decreased load of the ship.

"Please open the crate. You will find our delegate within. We trust you will treat him with the courtesy of an official emissary."

They set to work on the crate, its gray plastic material giving in readily to the application of their tools. But when it was opened, they stood aside in amazement and consternation.

There were a variety of metal pieces packed within, protected by a filmy packing material.
"Wait a minute," the general said. "Here's a book--"

He picked up a gray-bound volume, and opened its cover.
"Instructions for assembling Delegate," he read aloud. "First, remove all parts and arrange them in the..."

* * * * *

The Delegate, a handsomely constructed robot almost eight feet tall, was pieced together some three hours later, by a team of scientists and engineers who seemed to find the Venusian instructions as elementary as a blueprint in an Erector set. But simple as the job was, they were obviously impressed by the mechanism they had assembled. It stood impassive until they obeyed the final instruction. "Press Button K . . ."

They found button K, and pressed it.

The robot bowed.

"Thank you, gentlemen," it said, in sweet, unmetallic accents. "Now if you will please escort me to the meeting place . . ."

* * * * *

It wasn’t until three days after the landing that Jerry Bridges saw the Delegate again. Along with a dozen assorted government officials, Army officers, and scientists, he was quartered in a quonset hut in Fort Dix, New Jersey. Then, after seventy-two frustrating hours, he was escorted by Marine guard into New York City. No one told him his destination, and it wasn’t until he saw the bright strips of light across the face of the United Nations building that he knew where the meeting was to be held.

But his greatest surprise was yet to come. The vast auditorium which housed the general assembly was filled to its capacity, but there were new faces behind the plaques which designated the member nations. He couldn't believe his eyes at first, but as the meeting got under way, he knew that it was true. The highest echelons of the world’s governments were represented, even--Jerry gulped at the realization--Nikita Khrushchev himself. It was a summit meeting such as he had never dreamed possible, a summit meeting without benefit of long foreign minister’s debate. And the cause of it all, a placid, highly-polished metal robot, was seated blithely at a desk which bore the designation:

VENUS.

The robot delegate stood up.

"Gentlemen," it said into the microphone, and the great men at the council tables strained to hear the translator’s version through their headphones, "Gentlemen, I thank you for your prompt attention. I come as a Delegate from a great neighbor planet, in the interests of peace and progress for all the solar system. I come in the belief that peace is the responsibility of individuals, of nations, and now of worlds, and that each is dependent upon the other. I speak to you now through the electronic instrumentation which has been created for me, and I come to offer your planet not merely a threat, a promise, or an easy solution—but a challenge."

The council room stirred.

"Your earth satellites have been viewed with interest by the astronomers of our world, and we foresee the day when contact between our planets will be commonplace. As for ourselves, we have hitherto had little desire to explore beyond our realm, being far too occupied with internal matters. But our isolation cannot last in the face of your progress, so we believe that we must take part in your affairs."

"Here, then, is our challenge. Continue your struggle of ideas, compete with each other for the minds of men, fight your bloodless battles, if you know no other means to attain progress. But do all this without unleashing the terrible forces of power now at your command. Once unleashed, these forces may or may not destroy all that you have gained. But we, the scientists of Venus, promise you this—that on the very day your conflict deteriorates into heedless violence, we will not stand by and let the ugly contagion spread. On that day, we of Venus will act swiftly, mercilessly, and relentlessly—to destroy your world completely."

Again, the meeting room exploded in a babble of languages.

"The vessel which brought me here came as a messenger of peace. But envision it, men of Earth, as a messenger of war. Unstoppable, inexorable, it may return, bearing a different Delegate from Venus—a Delegate of Death, who speaks not in words, but in the explosion of atoms. Think of thousands of such Delegates, fired from a vantage point far beyond the reach of your retaliation. This is the promise and the challenge that will hang in your night sky from this moment forward. Look at the planet Venus, men of Earth, and see a Goddess of Vengeance, poised to wreak its wrath upon those who betray the peace."

The Delegate sat down.

* * * * *

Four days later, a mysterious explosion rocked the quiet sands of Los Alamos, and the Venus spacecraft was no more. Two hours after that, the robot delegate, its message delivered, its mission fulfilled, requested to be locked inside a bombproof chamber. When the door was opened, the Delegate was an exploded ruin.

The news flashed with lightning speed over the world, and Jerry Bridges’ eyewitness accounts of the incredible
event was syndicated throughout the nation. But his sudden celebrity left him vaguely unsatisfied.

He tried to explain his feeling to Greta on his first night back in Washington. They were in his apartment, and it was the first time Greta had consented to pay him the visit.

"Well, what's bothering you?" Greta pouted. "You've had the biggest story of the year under your byline. I should think you'd be tickled pink."

"It's not that," Jerry said moodily. "But ever since I heard the Delegate speak, something's been nagging me."

"But don't you think he's done good? Don't you think they'll be impressed by what he said?"

"I'm not worried about that. I think that damn robot did more for peace than anything that's ever come along in this cockeyed world. But still ..."

Greta snuggled up to him on the sofa. "You worry too much. Don't you ever think of anything else? You should learn to relax. It can be fun."

She started to prove it to him, and Jerry responded the way a normal, healthy male usually does. But in the middle of an embrace, he cried out:

"Wait a minute!"

"What's the matter?"

"I just thought of something! Now where the hell did I put my old notebooks?"

He got up from the sofa and went scurrying to a closet. From a debris of cardboard boxes, he found a worn old leather brief case, and cackled with delight when he found the yellowed notebooks inside.

"What are they?" Greta said.

"My old school notebooks. Greta, you'll have to excuse me. But there's something I've got to do, right away!"

"That's all right with me," Greta said haughtily. "I know when I'm not wanted."

She took her hat and coat from the hall closet, gave him one last chance to change his mind, and then left. Five minutes later, Jerry Bridges was calling the airlines.

* * * * *

It had been eleven years since Jerry had walked across the campus of Clifton University, heading for the ivy-choked main building. It was remarkable how little had changed, but the students seemed incredibly young. He was winded by the time he asked the pretty girl at the desk where Professor Martin Coltz could be located.

"Professor Coltz?" She stuck a pencil to her mouth. "Well, I guess he'd be in the Holland Laboratory about now."

"Holland Laboratory? What's that?"

"Oh, I guess that was after your time, wasn't it?"

Jerry felt decrepit, but managed to say: "It must be something new since I was here. Where is this place?"

He followed her directions, and located a fresh-painted building three hundred yards from the men's dorm. He met a student at the door, who told him that Professor Coltz would be found in the physics department.

The room was empty when Jerry entered, except for the single stooped figure vigorously erasing a blackboard. He turned when the door opened. If the students looked younger, Professor Coltz was far older than Jerry remembered. He was a tall man, with an unruly confusion of straight gray hair. He blinked when Jerry said:

"Hello, Professor. Do you remember me? Jerry Bridges?"

"Of course! I thought of you only yesterday, when I saw your name in the papers--"

They sat at facing student desks, and chatted about old times. But Jerry was impatient to get to the point of his visit, and he blurted out:

"Professor Coltz, something's been bothering me. It bothered me from the moment I heard the Delegate speak. I didn't know what it was until last night, when I dug out my old college notebooks. Thank God I kept them."

Coltz's eyes were suddenly hooded.

"What do you mean, Jerry?"

"There was something about the Robot's speech that sounded familiar--I could have sworn I'd heard some of the words before. I couldn't prove anything until I checked my old notes, and here's what I found."

He dug into his coat pocket and produced a sheet of paper. He unfolded it and read aloud:

"It's my belief that peace is the responsibility of individuals, of nations, and someday, even of worlds ...' Sound familiar, Professor?"

Coltz shifted uncomfortably. "I don't recall every silly thing I said, Jerry."

"But it's an interesting coincidence, isn't it, Professor? These very words were spoken by the Delegate from Venus."

"A coincidence--"

"Is it? But I also remember your interest in robotics. I'll never forget that mechanical homing pigeon you constructed. And you've probably learned much more these past eleven years."
"What are you driving at, Jerry?"

"Just this, Professor. I had a little daydream, recently, and I want you to hear it. I dreamed about a group of teachers, scientists, and engineers, a group who were suddenly struck by an exciting, incredible idea. A group that worked in the quiet and secrecy of a University on a fantastic scheme to force the idea of peace into the minds of the world's big shots. Does my dream interest you, Professor?"

"Go on."

"Well, I dreamt that this group would secretly launch an earth satellite of their own, and arrange for the nose cone to come down safely at a certain time and place. They would install a marvelous electronic robot within the cone, ready to be assembled. They would beam a radio message to earth from the cone, seemingly as if it originated from their 'spaceship.' Then, when the Robot was assembled, they would speak through it to demand peace for all mankind . . ."

"Jerry, if you do this--"

"You don't have to say it, Professor, I know what you're thinking. I'm a reporter, and my business is to tell the world everything I know. But if I did it, there might not be a world for me to write about, would there? No, thanks, Professor. As far as I'm concerned, what I told you was nothing more than a daydream."

* * * * *

Jerry braked the convertible to a halt, and put his arm around Greta's shoulder. She looked up at the star-filled night, and sighed romantically.

Jerry pointed. "That one."

Greta shivered closer to him.

"And to think what that terrible planet can do to us!"

"Oh, I dunno. Venus is also the Goddess of Love."

He swung his other arm around her, and Venus winked approvingly.

THE END
Anyone who holds that telepathy and psi powers would mean an end to crime quite obviously underestimates the ingenuity of the human race. Now consider a horserace that had to be fixed...

It was April, a couple of weeks before the Derby. We were playing poker, which is a game of skill that has nothing to do with the velocity of horse meat. Phil Howland kept slipping open but he managed to close up before I could tell whether the combination of Three-Five-Two-Four meant a full house of fives over fours or whether he was betting on an open-ended straight that he hadn't bothered to arrange in order as he held them. The Greek was impenetrable; he also blocked me from reading the deck so that I could estimate his hand from the cards that weren't dealt out. Chicago Charlie's mind was easy to read but no one could trust him. He was just as apt to think high to score someone out as he was to think low to suck the boys in. As for me, there I was, good old Wally Wilson, holding a pat straight flush from the eight to the queen of diamonds. I was thinking "full house" but I was betting like a weak three of a kind.

It was a terrific game. Between trying to read into these other guy's brains and keeping them from opening mine, and blocking the Greek's sly stunt of tipping over the poker chips as a distraction, I was also concerned about the eight thousand bucks that was in the pot. The trouble was that all four of us fully intended to rake it in. My straight flush would be good for the works in any normal game with wild cards, but the way this bunch was betting I couldn't be sure. Phil Howland didn't have much of a shield but he could really read, and if he read me--either my mind or my hand--he'd automatically radiate and that would be that.

I was about at the point of calling for the draw when the door opened without any knock. It was Tomboy Taylor. We'd been so engrossed with one another that none of us had caught her approach.

The Greek looked up at her and swore something that he hadn't read in Plato. "Showdown," he said, tossing in his hand.

I grunted and spread my five beauties.

Phil growled and shoved the pot in my direction, keeping both eyes on Tomboy Taylor.

She was something to keep eyes on, both figuratively and literally. The only thing that kept her from being a thionite dream was the Pittsburgh stogie that she insisted upon smoking, and the only thing that kept her from being some man's companion in spite of the stogie was the fact that he'd have to keep his mouth shut or she'd steal his back teeth--if not for fillings, then for practice.

"You, Wally Wilson," she said around the cigar, "get these grifters out of here. I got words."

The Greek growled. "Who says?"

"Barcelona says."

I do not have to explain who Barcelona is. All I have to say is that Phil Howland, The Greek, and Chicago Charlie arose without a word and filed out with their minds all held tight behind solid shields.

* * * * *

I said, "What does Barcelona want with me?"

Tomboy Taylor removed the stogie and said evenly, "Barcelona wants to see it Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace next month."

When I got done gulping I said, "You mean Barcelona wants me to fix the Kentucky Derby?"

"Oh no," she replied in a very throaty contralto that went with her figure and her thousand dollars worth of simple skirt and blouse. "You needn't 'Fix' anything. Just be sure that it's Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace in that order. One, two, three. Do I make Barcelona quite clear?"

I said, "Look, Tomboy, neither of them platers can even run that far, let alone running ahead."

"Barcelona says they can. And will." She leaned forward and stubbed out the Pittsburgh stogie and in the gesture she became wholly beautiful as well as beautifully wholesome. As she leaned toward me she unfogged the lighter surface of her mind and let me dig the faintly-leaking concept that she considered me physically attractive. This did not offend me. To the contrary it pleased my ego mightily until Tomboy Taylor deliberately let the barrier down to let me read the visual impression--which included all of the implications contained in the old cliché: "... And don't he look nacheral?"

"How," I asked on the recoil, "can I fix the Derby?"

"Barcelona says you know more about the horse racing business than any other big time operator in Chicago,"
she said smoothly. "Barcelona says that he doesn't know anything about horse racing at all, but he has great faith in your ability. Barcelona says that if anybody can make it Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace, one, two, and three, Wally Wilson is the man who can do it. In fact, Barcelona will be terribly disappointed if you can't."

I eyed her carefully. She was a composed and poised beauty who looked entirely incapable of uttering such words. I tried to peer into her mind but it was like trying to read the fine print of a telephone directory through a knitted woolen shawl. She smiled at me, her shapely lips curving graciously.

I said, "Barcelona seems to have a lot of confidence in my ability to arrange things."

With those delicate lips still curved sweetly, she said, "Barcelona is willing to bet money on your ability as a manager."

At this point Tomboy Taylor fished another Pittsburgh stogie out of her hundred dollar handbag, bit off the end with a quick nibble of even, pearly-white teeth, and stuffed the cigar in between the arched lips. She scratched a big kitchen match on the seat of her skirt after raising one shapely thigh to stretch the cloth. She puffed the stogie into light and became transformed from a beauty into a hag. My mind swore; it was like painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa.

Out of the corner of her mouth she replied to my unspoken question: "It helps to keep grippers like you at mind's length."

Then she left me alone with my littered card table and the eight thousand buck final pot--and the unhappy recollection that Barcelona had gotten upset at something Harold Grimmer had done, and he'd gone into Grimmer's place and busted Grimmer flat by starting with one lousy buck and letting it ride through eighteen straight passes. This feat of skill was performed under the mental noses of about eight operators trained to exert their extrasensory talents toward the defeat of sharpshooters who tried to add paraphysics to the laws of chance.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Delancey of the Chicago police came in an hour later. He refused my offer of a drink, and a smoke, and then because I didn't wave him to a chair he crossed my living room briskly and eased himself into my favorite chair. I think I could have won the waiting game but the prize wasn't good enough to interest me in playing. So I said, "O.K., lieutenant, what am I supposed to be guilty of?"

His smile was veiled. "You're not guilty of anything, so far as I know."

"You're not here to pass the time of day."

"No, I'm not. I want information."

"What kind of information?"

"One hears things," he said vaguely.

"Lieutenant," I said, "you've been watching one of those hallucine whodunit dramas where everybody stands around making witty sayings composed of disconnected phrases. You'll next be saying 'Evil Lurks In The Minds Of Men,' in a sepulchral intonation. Let's skip it, huh? What kind of things does one hear and from whom?"

"It starts with Gimpy Gordon."

"Whose mind meanders."

He shrugged. "Gimpy Gordon's meandering mind is well understood for what it is," he said. "But when it ceases to meander long enough to follow a single train of thought from beginning to logical end, then something is up."

"Such as what, for instance."

The lieutenant leaned back in my easy-chair and stared at the ceiling. "Wally," he said, "I was relaxing in the car with Sergeant Holliday driving. We passed a certain area on Michigan near Randolph and I caught the strong mental impression of someone who--in this day and age, mind you--had the temerity to pickpocket a wallet containing twenty-seven dollars. The sum of twenty-seven dollars was connected with the fact that the rewards made the risk worth taking; there were distinct impressions of playing that twenty-seven bucks across the board on three very especial nags at the Derby. The impression of the twenty-seven bucks changed into a mental vision of a hand holding a sack of peanuts. There was indecision. Should he take more risk and run up his available cash to make a larger killing, or would one Joseph Barcelona take a stand-offish attitude if some outsider were to lower the track odds by betting a bundle on Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace."

I said, "Lieutenant, you've a pickpocket to jug. Horse betting is legal."

"Since wagering on the speed of a horse has been redefined as 'The purchase of one corporate share to be valid for one transaction only and redeemable at a par value to be established by the outcome of this aforesaid single transaction,' horse betting is legal. This makes you an 'Investment Counselor, short-term transactions only,' and removes from you the odious nomenclature of 'Bookie.' However, permit me to point out that the buying and selling of shares of horseflesh does not grant a license to manipulate the outcome."

"You sound as though you're accusing me of contemplating a fix."
"Oh no. Not that."
"Then what?"
"Wally, Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace were refused by the National Association Of Dog Food Canners because of their substandard health. If I'm not mistaken, the Derby Association should have to run the race early that Saturday afternoon."
"Early?"
"Uh-huh. Early. Y'see, Wally, the blue laws of the blue grass state make it illegal to run horse races on Sunday, hence the start of the Derby must be early enough to let our three platers complete the race before midnight."
"Lieutenant, there still stands a mathematical probability that--"
"That the rest of the field will catch the Martian Glanders as they lead our three dogs past the clubhouse turn?"
"Lieutenant, you are wronging me."
"I haven't said a thing."
"Then why have you come here to bedevil me, lieutenant? If Barcelona has ideas of arranging a fix--"
"If Barcelona has such notions, Wally Wilson would know about it."
"Everybody," I said, "entertains notions of cleaning up a bundle by having the hundred-to-one shot come in by a length. Even Barcelona must have wild dreams now and then--"
"Come off it," he snapped. "Something's up and I want to know what's cooking."
* * * * *
"Lieutenant, you're now asking me to describe to you how someone might rig the Kentucky Derby in a world full of expert telepaths and perceptsives and manipulators, a large number of which will be rather well-paid to lend their extrasensory power to the process of keeping the Derby pure."
He eyed me sourly. "Remember, 'Fireman' O'Leary?"
"That's an unfair allegation," I replied. "The rumor that he started the Chicago Fire is absolutely unfounded."
"As I recall, 'Fireman' O'Leary came by his nickname about one hundred years after the holocaust that started on DeKoven Street in 1871. It seems that 'Fireman' O'Leary was most useful in helping the fillies home at Washington Park by assaulting them in the region of the bangtail with small bollops of pure incandescence. He was a pyrotic."
"That is a false accusation--"
"It was never proved," admitted the lieutenant, "because any one who accused anybody of making use of extrasensory faculties in 1871 would have been tossed into that establishment out on Narragansett Avenue where the headshrinkers once plied their mystic trade."
"Things are different now."
"Indeed they are, Wally. Which is why I'm here. No one but a fumbling idiot would try anything as crude as speeding a dog over the line by pyrotics or by jolting the animals with a bolt of electrical energy."
"So--?"
"So considering the sad and sorry fact that human nature does not change very much despite the vast possibility for improvement, we must anticipate a fix that has been contrived and executed on a level that takes full cognizance of the widespread presence of psi-function."
"But again, why me?"
"Was not 'Fireman' O'Leary an ancestor of yours?"
"He was my maternal grandparent."
"And so you do indeed come from a long line of horse operators, don't you?"
"I resent your invidious implications."
"And wasn't 'Wireless' Wilson the paternal ancestor from whom the family name has come?"
"I fail to see ... the allegation that my father's father employed telepathy to transmit track information faster than the wire services has never been proved."
He smiled knowingly. "Wally," he said slowly, "if you feel that allegations have somehow impugned the pure name of your family, you could apply for a review of their several appearances in court. It's possible that 'Fireman' O'Leary did not use his pyrotic talent to enhance the running speed of some tired old dogs."
"But--"
"So I think we understand one another, Wally. There is also reason to believe that psionic talent tends to run in families. You're a psi-man and a good one."
"If I hear of anything--"
"You'll let me know," he said flatly. "And if Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and-or Lady Grace even so much as succeed in staying on their feet for the whole race, I'll be back demanding to know how you--Wally Wilson--managed to hold them up!"
After which the good Lieutenant Delancey left me to my thoughts—which were most uncomfortable.

Barcelona had to be kept cheerful. But the dogs he'd picked could only come in first unassisted if they happened to be leading the field that started the next race, and even then the post time would have to be delayed to give them a longer head start. That meant that if our three platers came awake, everybody would be looking for the fix.

Anybody who planned a caper would sure have to plan it well.

Barcelona hadn't planned the fix, he merely stated a firm desire and either Barcelona got what he wanted or I got what I didn't want, and I had to do it real good or Delancey would make it real hot for me.

I was not only being forced to enter a life of crime, I was also being forced to perform cleverly.

It wasn't fair for the law to gang up with the crooks against me.

And so with a mind feeling sort of like the famous sparrow who'd gotten trapped for three hours in a badminton game at Forest Hills, I built a strong highball, and poured it down while my hallucene set was warming up. I needed the highball as well as the relaxation, because I knew that the "Drama" being presented was the hundred and umpty-umph remake of "Tarzan of the Apes" and for ninety solid minutes I would be swinging through trees without benefit of alcohol. Tarzan, you'll remember, did not learn to smoke and drink until the second book.

* * * * *

The hallucene did relax me and kept my mind from its worry even though the drama was cast for kids and therefore contained a maximum of tree-swinging and ape-gymnastics and a near dearth of Lady Jane's pleasant company. What was irritating was the traces of wrong aroma. If one should not associate the African jungle with the aroma of a cheap bar, one should be forgiven for objecting to Lady Jane with a strong flavor of tobacco and cheap booze on her breath.

And so I awoke with this irritating conflict in my senses to discover that I'd dropped out of my character as Tarzan and my surroundings of the jungle, but I'd somehow brought the stench of cheap liquor and moist cigarettes with me.

There was an occupant in the chair next to mine. He needed a bath and he needed a shave but both would have been wasted if he couldn't change his clothing, too. His name was Gimpy Gordon.

I said, "Get out!"

"He whined, "Mr. Wilson, you just gotta help me."

"How?"

"Fer years," he said, "I been living on peanuts. I been runnin' errands for hard coins. I been--"

"Swiping the take of a Red Cross box," I snapped at him.

"Aw, Mr. Wilson," he whined, "I simply gotta make a stake. I'm a-goin' to send it back when I win."

"Are you going to win?"

"Can't I?"

For a moment I toyed with the idea of being honest with the Gimp. Somehow, someone should tell the duffer that all horse players die broke, or that if he could make a living I'd be out of business.

Gimpy Gordon was one of Life's Unfortunates. If it were to rain gold coins, Gimpy would be out wearing boxing gloves. His mental processes meandered because of too much methyl. His unfortunate nickname did not come from the old-fashioned reason that he walked with a limp, but from the even more unfortunate reason that he thought with a limp. In his own unhealthy way he was--could we call it "Lucky" by any standard of honesty? In this world full of highly developed psi talent, the Gimp could pick a pocket and get away with it because he often literally could not remember where and how he'd acquired the wallet for longer than a half minute. And it was a sort of general unwritten rule that any citizen so utterly befogged as to permit his wealth to be lifted via light fingers should lose it as a lesson!

But then it did indeed occur to me that maybe I could make use of the Gimp.

I said, "What can I do, Gimpy?"

"Mr. Wilson," he pleaded, "is it true that you're workin' for Barcelona?"

"Now, you know I can't answer that."

I could read his mind struggling with this concept. It was sort of like trying to read a deck of Chinese Fortune Cards being shuffled before they're placed in the machine at the Penny Arcade. As the drunk once said after reading the Telephone Directory: "Not much plot, but egad! What a cast of characters!" The gist of his mental maundering was a childlike desire to have everything sewed up tight. He wanted to win, to be told that he'd win, and to have all the rules altered ad hoc to assure his winning.

Just where he'd picked up the inside dope that Barcelona favored Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace in the Derby I could not dig out of him. Just how Gimpy had made the association between this clambake and me--good old Wally Wilson--I couldn't dig either. But here he was with his--by now--sixty-five bucks carefully heisted,
lifted, pinched and fingered, and by the great Harry, Gimpy was not a-goin' to lay it across the board on those three rejects from a claiming race unless he had a cast-iron assurance that they'd come in across the board, one, two, and three.

I said slowly, "If I were even thinking of working for Mr. Barcelona," I told him, "I would be very careful never, never to mention it, you know."

This bundle of The Awful Truth hit him and began to sink in with the inexorable absorption of water dropping down into a bucket of dry sand. It took some time for the process to climax. Once it reached Home Base it took another period of time for the information to be inspected, sorted out, identified, analyzed, and in a very limited degree, understood.

He looked up at me. "I couldn't cuff a hundred, could I?"

I shook my head. I didn't have to veil my mind because I knew that Gimpy was about as talented a telepath as a tallow candle. Frankly between me and thee, dear reader, I do not put anybody's bet on the cuff. I do a fair-to-middling brisk trade in booking bets placed and discussed by telepathy, but the ones I accept and pay off on—if they're lucky—are those folks who've been sufficiently foresighted to lay it on the line with a retainer against which their losses can be assessed.

On the other hand I could see in Gimpy's mind the simple logic that told him that as a bookmaker I'd be disinclined to lend him money which he'd use to place with me against a sure-thing long shot. If I were to "Lend" him a century for an on-the-cuff bet on a 100:1 horse, especially one that I knew was sure to come in, I might better simply hand him one hundred times one hundred dollars as a gift. It would save a lot of messy bookkeeping.

So the fact that I wouldn't cuff a bet for Gimpy gave him his own proof that I was confirming the fix.

Then I buttered the process.

"Gimp, do you know another good bookmaker?"

"Sure. But you're the best."

"Know one that'll take a bet from you—one that you don't like?"

"Sure, Mr. Wilson."

"Then," I said hauling a thousand out of my wallet, "Put this on our horses for me."

He eyed the grand. "But won't Mr. Barcelona be unhappy? Won't that run down the track odds?"

I laughed. "The whole world knows them dogs as also-rans," I said. "Gimpy, they put long shots like those into races just to clip the suckers who think there is a real hundred-to-one chance that a 100:1 horse will outrun favorites."

"Well, if you say so, Mr. Wilson."

"I say so."

"Thanks. I'll pay it back."

He would. I'd see to that.

Gimpy Gordon scuttled out of my bailiwick almost on a dead run. He was positively radiating merriment and joy and excitement. The note in his hand represented a sum greater than he had ever seen in one piece at any time of his life, and the concept of the riches he would know when they paid off on the Kentucky Derby was vague simply because Gimpy could not grasp the magnitude of such magnificence. Oddly, for some unexpected reason or from some unknown source hidden deep in his past, his mind pronounced it "Darby."

I returned to my African jungle still bored with the lack of anything constructive. I returned at about the point where Tarzan and Jane were going through that silly, "Me Tarzan; You Jane" routine which was even more irritating because the program director or someone had muffed the perfume that the Lady Jane wore. Instead of the wholesome freshness of the free, open air, Jane was wearing a heady, spicy scent engineered to cut its way through the blocking barrier of stale cigar smoke, whisky-laden secondhand air, and a waft of cooking aroma from the kitchen of the standard cosmopolitan bistro.

Worse, it got worse instead of better. Where a clever effects-director might have started with the heavy sophisticated scent and switched to something lighter and airier as Jane was moved away from civilization, this one had done it backwards for some absolutely ridiculous reason. It finally got strong enough to distract me out of my characterization, and I came back to reality to realize once more that reality had been strong enough to cut into the concentration level of a hallucene. There was strong woman-presence in my room, and as I looked around I found that Tomboy Taylor had come in—just as Gimpy Gordon had—and was sitting in the other hallucene chair. She was probably playing Lady Jane to my Tarzan.

Tomboy Taylor had changed to a short-skirted, low-necked cocktail dress; relaxed with her eyes closed in my hallucene chair she looked lovely. She looked as vulnerable as a soft kitten. Remembering that it's the soft
I went to my little bar and refilled my highball glass because swinging through the jungle makes one thirsty, and while I was pouring I took a sly peek into Tomboy Taylor's mind.

She was not hallucining. She was watching me. And when I made contact with her, she radiated a sort of overall aura of amusement-emotion, covered up her conscious deliberation, and blocked any probing by directing me mentally, "Make it two, Wally."

I built her one, handed it to her, and then said, "Folks these days sure have forgotten how to use doorbells."

"If you don't want people coming in, Wally, you should restrict your mindwarden a little. It's set to admit anybody who does not approach the door with vigorous intent to commit grave physical harm. When the thing radiates 'Come in and relax' is a girl supposed to stand outside twiggling on the doorbell?"

I dropped the subject thinking that maybe I shouldn't have brought it up in the first place. It's one that can't be answered by logic, whereas a firm emotional statement of like or dislike stops all counter-argument and I'd made the mistake of questioning my own judgment.

So I eyed her and said, "Tomboy, you did not come here to indulge in small talk."

"No," she admitted. "I'm here to keep track of you, Wally."

"Oh?"

"Our great and good friend wants me to make notes on how clever you are at arranging things."

"You mean Barcelona sent you."

"That's about it."

I looked at her askance. "And how long are you going to stay?"

She smiled. "Until Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace come across the finish line One, Two, and Three at Churchill Downs on Derby Day."

I grinned at her. "Considering that trio of turtles, Tomboy, it may be for years and it may be forever."

She held up her glass in a sort of a toast. "Or," she said, "'Til death do us part!"

A little bitterly I said, "One might think that Barcelona doesn't trust me."

She replied, "It isn't a matter of trust. Barcelona holds you among his very closest friends. He is well aware of the fact that you would do anything for him, that you prize his friendship so highly yourself that you would go to the most desperate lengths to keep it firm and true. Yet he realizes that the simple desire he has recently expressed does place you in a delicate mental attitude. You are likely to feel that he shouldn't have expressed this desire since you feel obligated to fulfill it. He feels that maybe this obligation to maintain friendship at all costs may cause resentment. Since Barcelona does not want you to resent him, he sent me to be your companion in the hope that I might get some forewarning should your friendship for him begin to weaken."

* * * * *

Just why in this day and age she didn't just come out and say--or think--flatly that she was there to keep me in line, I don't know. But she was, talking all around the main point and delivering the information by long-winded inference.

Even so, without her Pittsburgh stogie, Tomboy Taylor was a mighty attractive dish, and I knew that she could also be a bright and interesting conversationalist if she wanted to be. Under other circumstances I might have enjoyed the company, but it was no pleasure to know that every grain of her one hundred and fourteen pounds avoirdupois was Barcelona's Personal Property. At that moment I realized that I was not too much concerned with what Barcelona's reaction might be. Instead, I was wishing that things were different so that any activity between us would be for our own personal gain and pleasure rather than the order of or the fight against one Joseph Barcelona.

There was one consolation. Tomboy Taylor had not come equipped with a box of Pittsburgh stogies with which to make my appreciation of beauty throw up its lunch.

She said, sweetly, "The better to ensnare you, my dear."

But as she spoke, for just a moment her thick woolly mind shield thinned out enough for me to catch a strange, puzzled grasp for understanding. As if for the first time she had been shown how admiration for physical attractiveness could be both honest and good. That my repugnant attitude over her Pittsburgh stogies was not so much based upon the spoiling of beauty by the addition of ugliness, but the fact that the act itself cheapened her in my eyes.

Then she caught me peeking and clamped down a mind screen that made the old so-called "Iron Curtain" resemble a rusty sieve.

"I'm the one that's supposed to keep track of you, you remember," she said, once more covering up and leaping mentally to the attack.

"I'll remember," I said. "But will you tell me something?"

"Maybe," she said in a veiled attitude.
"Is your boy friend really interested in cleaning up, or is he interested in watching me squirm out of a trap he set for me?"

"In the first place," she said, "I may have been seen in Barcelona's presence but please remember that my association with Mr. Joseph Barcelona has always been strictly on a financial plane. This eliminates the inference contained under the phrase 'Boy Friend.' Check?"

"O.K., Tomboy, if that's the--"

"That's not only the way I want it," she said, "but that's the way it always has been and always will be. Second, I have been getting tired of this nickname 'Tomboy'. If we're going to be racked this close together, you'll grate on my nerves less if you use my right name. It's just plain 'Nora' but I'd like to hear it once in a while."

I nodded soberly. I held out a hand but she put her empty highball glass in it instead of her own little paw. I shrugged and mixed and when I returned and handed it to her I said, "I'll make you a deal. I'll call you 'Nora' just so long as you maintain the manners and attitude of a female, feminine, lady-type woman. I'll treat you like a woman, but you've got to earn it. Is that a deal?"

She looked at me, her expression shy and as defenseless as a bruiser-type caught reading sentimental poetry. I perceived that I had again touched a sensitive spot by demanding that she be more than physically spectacular. Her defenses went down and I saw that she really did not know the answer to my question. I did. It had to do with something that only the achievement of a God-like state--or extreme old age--would change.

This time it was not so much the answer to why little boys walk high fences in front of little girls. It had much more to do with the result of what happens between little boys when the little girl hides her baseball bat and straightens the seams of her stockings when one certain little boy comes into sight. Joseph Barcelona did not admire my ability. He had, therefore, caused me to back myself into a corner where I'd be taken down a peg, shown-up as a second-rater--with the little girl as a witness.

And why had Barcelona been so brash as to send the little girl into my company in order for her to witness my downfall?

Let me tell you about Joe Barcelona.

* * * * *

Normally honest citizens often complain that Barcelona is living high off'n the hawg instead of slugging it out in residence at Stateville, Joliet, Illinois.

With their straight-line approach to simple logic, these citizens argue that the advent of telepathy should have rendered the falsehood impossible, and that perception should enable anybody with half a talent to uncover hidden evidence. Then since Mr. Joseph Barcelona is obviously not languishing in jail, it is patent that the police are not making full use of their talented extrasensory operators, nor the evidence thus collected.

And then after having argued thus, our upstanding citizen will fire off a fast thought to his wife and ask her to invite the neighbors over that evening for a game of bridge.

None of these simple-type of logicians seem to be aware of the rules for bridge or poker that were in force prior to extrasensory training courses. Since no one recognized psionics, the rules did not take telepathy, perception, manipulation, into any consideration whatsoever. Psionics hadn't done away with anything including the old shell game. All psionics had done was to make the game of chance into a game of skill, and made the game of skill into a game of talent that required better control and longer training in order to gain full proficiency.

In Barcelona's case, he had achieved his own apparent immunity by surrounding himself with a number of hirelings who drew a handsome salary for sitting around thinking noisy thoughts. Noisy thoughts, jarring thoughts, stunts like the concentration-interrupter of playing the first twenty notes of Brahms' Lullaby in perfect pitch and timing and then playing the twenty-first note in staccato and a half-tone flat. Making mental contact with Barcelona was approximately the analogue of eavesdropping upon the intimate cooing of a lover sweet-talking his lady in the middle of a sawmill working on an order three days late under a high priority and a penalty clause for delayed delivery.

People who wonder how Barcelona can think for himself with all of that terrific mental racket going on do not know that Barcelona is one of those very rare birds who can really concentrate to the whole exclusion of any distraction short of a vigorous threat to his physical well-being.

And so his trick of sending Nora Taylor served a threefold purpose. It indicated his contempt for me. It removed Nora from his zone of interference so that she could really witness firsthand my mental squirmings as I watched my own comeuppance bearing down on me. It also gave him double the telepathic contact with me and my counter-plans--if any.

In the latter, you see, Barcelona's way of collecting outside information was to order a temporary cease-fire of the mental noise barrage and then he'd sally forth like a one-man mental commando raid to make a fast grab for what he wanted. Since the best of telepaths cannot read a man's opinion of prunes when he's thinking of peanuts, it is
necessary for someone to be thinking of the subject he wants when he makes his raid. Having two in the know and interested doubled his chance for success.

There was also the possibility that Barcelona might consider his deliberate "Leak" to Gimpy Gordon ineffective. Most sensible folks are disinclined to treat Gimpy's delusions of grandeur seriously despite the truth of the cliché that states that a one-to-one correspondence does indeed exist between the perception of smoke and the existence of pyrotic activity. Nora Taylor would add some certification to the rumor. One thing simply had to be: There must be no mistake about placing information in Lieutenant Delancey's hands so as to create the other jaw of the pincers that I was going to be forced to close upon myself.

* * * * *

I tried a gentle poke in the general direction of Barcelona and found that the mental noise was too much to stand. I withdrew just a bit and closed down the opening until the racket was no more than a mental rumor, and I waited. I hunched that Barcelona would be curious to know how his contact-girl was making out, and might be holding a cease-fire early in this phase of the operation. I was right.

The noise diminished with the suddenness of turning off a mental switch, and as it stopped I went in and practically popped Barcelona on the noodle with:

"How-de-do, Joseph."

He recoiled at the unexpected thrust, but came back with: "Wally Wilson! Got a minute?"

I looked at the calendar, counted off the days to Derby Day in my mind and told him that I had that long—at the very least and probably much, much longer.

"Thinks you!"

"Methinks," I replied.

"Wally boy," he returned, "you aren't playing this very smart."

"Suppose you tell me how you'd be playing it," I bounced back at him. "Tell you how I have erred?"

He went vague on me. "If I were of a suspicious nature, I would begin to wonder about certain connective events. For instance, let's hypothecate. Let's say that a certain prominent bookmaker had been suspected of planning to put a fix on a certain important horse race, but of course nothing could be proved. Now from another source we suddenly discover strong evidence to suggest that this bookmaker is not accepting wagers on the horses he is backing, but conversely is busy laying wagers on the same nags through the help of a rather inept go-between."

I grunted aloud which caused Nora Taylor to look up in surprise. I was tempted to say it aloud but I did not. I thought:

"In simple terms, Joseph, you are miffed because I will not cover your bets."

"I thought nothing of the sort."

"Let's hedge? I love you too, Joseph."

"Well, are you or aren't you?"

"Are I what? Going to top the frosting by financing your little scheme to put the pinch on me?"

"Now, Wally--"

"Can it, Joseph. We're both big boys now and we both know what the score is. You know and I know that the first time I or one of my boys takes a bet on any one of the three turtles you like, the guy who laid the bet is going to slip the word to one of your outside men. And you're going to leap to the strange conclusion that if Wally Wilson is accepting bets against his own fix, he must know something exceedingly interesting."

"Now, who's been saying anything about a fix, Wally?"

"The people," I thought bluntly, "who have most recently been associated with your clever kind of operator."

"That isn't very nice, Wally."

If it had been a telephone conversation, I'd have slammed the telephone on him. The mealy-mouthed louse and his hypocritical gab was making me mad—and I knew that he was making me mad simply to make me lose control of my blanket. I couldn't stop it, so I let my anger out by thinking:

"You think you are clever because you're slipping through sly little loopholes, Joseph. I'm going to show you how neat it is to get everything I want including your grudging admission of defeat by the process of making use of the laws and rules that work in my favor."

"You're a wise guy," he hurled back at me.

"I'm real clever, Barcelona. And I'm big enough to face you, even though Phil Howland, The Greek, and Chicago Charlie make like cold clams at the mention of your name."

"Why, you punk--"

"Go away, Barcelona. Go away before I make up my mind to make you eat it."

I turned to Nora Taylor and regarded her charms and attractions both physical and mental with open and glowing admiration. It had the precalculated result and it wouldn't have been a whit different if I'd filed a declaration
of intent and forced her to read it first.

It even satisfied my ambient curiosity about what a telepathed grinding of the teeth in frustrated anger would transmit as. And when it managed to occur to an unemployed thought-center of my brain that the lines of battle were soft and sweetly curved indeed, Joseph Barcelona couldn't stand it any more. He just gave a mental sigh and signaled for the noisemakers to shut him off from contact.

* * * * *

Derby Day, the First Saturday in May, dawnd warm and clear with a fast, dry track forecast for post time. The doorbell woke me up and I dredged my apartment to identify Nora fiddling in my two-bit kitchen with ham and eggs. Outside it was Lieutenant Delancey practising kinematics by pressing the button with a levitated pencil instead of shoving on the thing directly. (I'd changed the combination on the mindwarden at Nora's suggestion.)

As I struggled out of bed, Nora flashed, "You get it, Wally," at me. She was busy manipulating the ham slicer and the coffee percolator and floating more eggs from the refrigerator. The invitation and the acceptance for and of breakfast was still floating in the mental atmosphere heavy enough to smell the coffee.

I replied to both of them, "If he can't get in, let him go hungry."

Lieutenant Delancey manipulated the door after I'd reset the mindwarden for him. He came in with a loud verbal greeting that Nora answered by a call from the kitchen. I couldn't hear them because I was in the shower by that time. However, I did ask, "What gives, lieutenant?"

"It's Derby Day."
"Yeah. So what?"
"Going to watch it from here?" he thought incredulously.
"Why not? Be a big jam down there."
"I've a box," he said.
"No ... how--?"

"Both the Derby Association and the Chicago Police Force have assigned me to protect you from the evil doings of sinners," he said with a chuckle. "And I suggested that the best way of keeping an official eye on you was to visit you at the scene of the alleged intended crime and to serve that end they provided me with a box where we can all be together."

I tossed, "And if we do not elect to go to Kentucky?"
He chuckled again. "Then I shall have to arrest you."
"For what?"
"There is an old law in the City Statute that declares something called 'Massive Cohabitation' to be illegal. You have been naughty, Wally."

Nora exploded. "We have not!" she cried.

Lieutenant Delancey laughed like a stage villain. "The law I mention," he said after a bit of belly-laughing, "was passed long, long ago before telepathy and perception were available to provide the truth. At that time the law took the stand that any unmarried couple living together would take advantage of their unchaperoned freedom, and if this state of cohabitation went on for a considerable length of time--called 'Massive' but don't ask me to justify the term--the probability of their taking pleasure in one another's company approached a one hundred per cent positive probability.

"Now this law was never amended by the Review Act. Hence the fact that you have been chastely occupying separate chambers has nothing to do with the letter of the law that says simply that it is not lawful for an unmarried couple to live under the same unchaperoned roof."

I came out of the shower toweling myself and manipulating a selection of clean clothing out of the closet in my bedroom.

"The law," I observed, "is administered by the Intent of the Law, and not by the Letter, isn't it?"
"Oh, sure," he said. "But I'm not qualified to interpret the law. I'll arrest you and bring you to trial and then it's up to some judge to rule upon your purity and innocence of criminal intent, and freedom from moral taint or turpitude. Maybe take weeks, you know."

"And what's the alternative?" I grunted.
"Flight," he said in a sinister tone as I came out of my bedroom putting the last finishes on my necktie. "Flight away from the jurisdiction of the law that proposes to warp the meaning of the law to accomplish its own ends."

"And you?"
"My duty," he grinned, "is to pursue you."
"In which case," observed Nora Taylor, "we might as well fly together and save both time and money."

"That is why I have my personal sky-buggy all ready to go instead of requisitioning an official vehicle," he said. He scooped a fork full of eggs and said, "You're a fool, Wally. The lady can cook."
I chuckled. "And what would happen if I hauled off and married her?"
"You mean right here and now?"
"Yes."
"Sorry. I'd have to restrain you. You see, you couldn't get a legal license nor go through any of the other legal activities, ergo there would be a prima facie illegality about some part of the ceremony. Without being definite as to which phase, I would find it my duty to restrain you from indulging in any act the consummation of which would be illegal."

Nora said in pseudo-petulant tone, "I've been damned with very faint praise."
"How so?"
"Wally Wilson has just said that he'd rather marry me than go to the Kentucky Derby with you."
Lieutenant Delancey said, "I urge you both to come along. You see, my box is also being occupied by an old friend of yours. I managed to talk him into joining us, and with reluctance he consented."
"I'm a mind reader," I said. "Our friend's name is Joseph Barcelona?"
"As they say on the space radio, 'Aye-firm, over and out!'"

Barcelona was there with two of his boys. Watching them were four ununiformed officers. Nora and I and the lieutenant were joined later by Gimpy Gordon, who might have been radiating childlike wonder and a circus-air of excitement at actually being at the Derby. He might have been. No one could cut through the constant, maddening mental blah-blah-blah that was being churned out by Barcelona's noisemakers.

He greeted me curtly, eyed Nora hungrily. He said: "You look pretty confident, Wilson."
"I can't lose," I said.
"No? Frankly I don't see how you can win."

I smiled. "Without mentioning any names, Joseph, I feel confident that the final outcome of this racing contest will be just as you want it to be. I shall ask no credit be given me, although I shall be greatly admired by our mutual friend Miss Nora Taylor who will think that I am truly wonderful for making you happy. And it is more than likely that she may marry me once I have shown you, and she, and Lieutenant Delancey, that I am a law-abiding citizen as well as a man who values friendship enough to do as his old pal Joe Barcelona desires."
"It's going to be one of the neatest tricks of the week," he said.
"It will be done by the proper application of laws," I said modestly.

Behind us, Gimpy Gordon light-fingered a half dollar out of Delancey's pocket and was attracting the attention of a hot dog peddler by waving his program. Some folks nearby were eying Barcelona's noisemakers angrily but making very little visible protest once they identified him. Nora was reading her program and underlining some horses. The whole place began to grow into a strange excited silence as the track board began to go up. It was to be a nine-horse race, and at the top of the list were three--count them--three odds-on favorites:


And then, of course, there were our three mud turtles which must have been entered by someone who thought that the Kentucky Derby was a claiming race and who hoped that the LePage's Glue people would make a bid for the three mounds of thoroughbred horseflesh that dropped dead in the backstretch:


The rack hadn't hit the top of the slide before there was a sort of mass-movement towards the mutuel windows. The ones who didn't go in person tried to hurl betting-thoughts in the hope of getting there early and failing this they arose and followed the crowd. Slowly the odds began to change; the figures on our three placers began to rise. There was very little activity on the other six horses. Slow-thinking Gimpy Gordon started to get up but I put out a hand to stop him.

"But the odds are dropping," he complained.
"Gimpy," I said, "they pay on the final listing anyway. But would you like a tip?"
"Sure," he said nervously.

"My tip is to keep your cash in your pocket. Put it on the nose of some horse and it's likely to get blown away by a high wind."

The odds were changing rapidly. What with psionic information receivers, trend predictors and estimated anticipators, the mutuel computers kept up with the physical transfer of funds, figured out the latest odds, and flipped the figures as fast as the machinery could work the dials. In no more than a few minutes the odds on the three placers looked more like the odds on horses that stood a chance of winning.

Barcelona looked at me. "What did you do, wise guy?"
"Who ... me? Why, I didn't do anything that you did not start—except that maybe I was a little more generous."
"Spiel!" he snarled.
"Why, shucks, Joseph. All I did was to slip good old Gimpy Gordon a tip."
"How much?"
"Just a lousy little thousand dollar bill."
"A grand! For what, wise guy?"
"Why, just for telling me what horses you picked for the Derby."

Barcelona looked at the odds on his horses. Flying Heels had passed even money and was heading for a one-to-two odds-on. The other platers were following accordingly.

"And what did you tell Gimpy, Wilson?"
"You tell him, Gimp," I said.
"Why, Wilson just said that we should ride along with you, Mr. Barcelona, because you are such a nice guy that everybody works awfully hard to see that you get what you want."

"There's more!" roared Barcelona.
"Only that I shouldn't mention it to anybody, and that I shouldn't place my bet until the mutuel windows open because if I did it would louse up the odds and make you unhappy." Gimpy looked at Barcelona's stormy face and he grew frightened. "Honest, Mr. Barcelona, I didn't say a word to nobody. Not a word." He turned to me and whined plaintively, "You tell him, Mr. Wilson. I didn't say a word."

I soothed him. "We know you didn't, Gimpy."

Barcelona exploded. "Ye Gods!" he howled. "They used that gimmick on me when I lost my first baby tooth. 'Don't put your tongue in the vacant place,' they said, 'and don't think of the words Gold Tooth and it'll grow in natural gold!'"

As he spoke the odds on Flying Heels changed from a staggering One-to-Eight to an even more staggering One-to-Ten. That meant that anybody holding less than a ten-dollar bet on such a winner would only get his own money back because the track does not insult its clients by weighing them down with coins in the form of small change. They keep the change and call it "Breakage" for any amount over an even-dollar money.

Delancey said to Barcelona, "You have had it, Joseph."
Barcelona snarled, "Put the big arm on Wilson here. He's the fast man with the big fix."
"Wilson didn't fix any race, Joseph. He just parlayed some of the laws of human nature into a win for himself and a lose for you."

"Now see here—what's this guff about human nature?"

"Well, there's the human desire to ride with a winner, and the human frailty that hopes to get something for nothing. To say nothing of the great human desire to be 'On the Inside' track or 'In the Know' so that they can bet on the 'Sure Thing'. And so," said Delancey, "we've about twenty thousand human beings full of human nature holding tickets on your three dogs, Joseph. They bet their money because the 'Inside Dope' said that the big fix was in. And I can tell you that what twenty thousand people are going to do to this 'Inside Dope' when their nags run last is going to make Torquemada ask permission to return to life for a Second Inquisition, this time with extrasensory tortures."

He turned to me as Barcelona went pale. "Wally," he asked, "want to bet that someone doesn't remember that old question of whether it is possible to break every bone in a man's body without killing him?"

"I'd be a fool to cover that one," I said. "But I'll play even money and on either side of whether Joseph dies or lives through the process."

"Stop it!" screamed Barcelona. He grabbed me by the arm. "Wilson," he pleaded, "Can you? Stop it, I mean? Can you fix it?"

"Sure," I said.
"Legally?"
"Yep. But it'll cost you."
"Just money?"
"Just money—and admitting that you lost, Joseph!"
"I lose," he said. "Go ahead!"
"O.K., Joseph. Now, let's be real honest. Those three longshore turtles belong to you, don't they?"
"Yes."

"And right now you wouldn't even want to see them run, would you? In fact, you really want that they shouldn't run."

"Yes."

"All right, Joseph. Call off your noisemakers and toss the Head Steward a thought. Tell him you're scratching your entries."
"But that won't stop the people from losing their money."

"Natch. So next you broadcast a thought that because of this terrible, grievous error you are refunding their money out of your own pocket since the Track Association will not or is not obliged to."

He turned to his pair of rattleheads and snarled, "All right. Shut up!"

A mental silence fell that was like the peace of rest after a busy day. As Barcelona was tossing his cancellation at the Steward and preparing to make a full and plausible explanation to the gambling instinct of the Kentucky Derby crowd, I considered the matter carefully:

"Let's see," I thought. "He wants 'em not to run and so he can't complain to me if they do not. I didn't fix the race, so Lieutenant Delancey can't accuse me of that. That makes everybody happy, and I win!"

A small hand stole into mine. "How about me, Wally?" Nora asked sweetly.

I looked down at a thionite dream come true by the glow in her eyes that admired no one else but me. "You're mine," I reminded her, "until Flying Heels, Moonbeam, and Lady Grace win One, Two, and Three at the Kentucky Derby."

"Or," she said mischievously, "'Til death do us part!"

* * * * *

I was instructing her how to respond to a kiss as a lady should respond when about two hundred thousand noisy, exuberant human natures yelled and radiated and thought: "They're Off!"

But they didn't mean us. They were watching a bunch of long-faced hayburners chasing one another around a dusty track.

Human nature ain't changed a bit. It's just more complicated in an extrasensory sort of way.

THE END
radiations.

Cosmically, the whole thing was infinitesimal. Ever since man learned how to liberate intra-atomic energy, the vortices of disintegration had been breaking out of control. Such accidents had been happening, were happening, and would continue indefinitely to happen. More than one world, perhaps, had been or would be consumed to the last gram by such loose atomic vortices. What of that? Of what real importance are a few grains of sand to an ocean beach five thousand miles long, a hundred miles wide, and ten miles deep?

And even to that individual grain of sand called "Earth"—or, in modern parlance, "Sol Three," or "Tellus of Sol," or simply "Tellus"—the affair was of negligible importance. One man had died; but, in dying, he had added one more page to the thick bulk of negative results already on file. That Mrs. Cloud and her children had perished was merely unfortunate. The vortex itself was not yet a real threat to Tellus. It was a "new" one, and thus it would be a long time before it would become other than a local menace. And well before that could happen—before even the oldest of Tellus' loose vortices had eaten away much of her mass or poisoned much of her atmosphere, her scientists would have solved the problem. It was unthinkable that Tellus, the point of origin and the very center of Galactic Civilization, should cease to exist.

* * * * *

But to Neal Cloud the accident was the ultimate catastrophe. His personal universe had crashed in ruins; what was left was not worth picking up. He and Jo had been married for almost twenty years and the bonds between them had grown stronger, deeper, truer with every passing day. And the kids.... It couldn't have happened ... fate COULDN'T do this to him ... but it had ... it could. Gone ... gone ... GONE....

And to Neal Cloud, atomic physicist, sitting there at his desk in torn, despairing abstraction, with black maggots of thought gnawing holes in his brain, the catastrophe was doubly galling because of its cruel irony. For he was second from the top in the Atomic Research Laboratory; his life's work had been a search for a means of extinguishment of exactly such loose vortices as had destroyed his all.

His eyes focussed vaguely upon the portrait. Clear, honest gray eyes ... lines of character and of humor ... sweetly curved lips, ready to smile or to kiss....

He wrenched his eyes away and scribbled briefly upon a sheet of paper. Then, getting up stiffly, he took the portrait and moved woodenly across the room to a furnace. As though enshrining it he placed the plastic block upon a refractory between the electrodes and threw a switch. After the flaming arc had done its work he turned and handed the paper to a tall man, dressed in plain gray leather, who had been watching him with quiet, understanding eyes. Significant enough to the initiated of the importance of this laboratory is the fact that it was headed by an Unattached Lensman.

"As of now, Phil, if it's QX with you."

The Gray Lensman took the document, glanced at it, and slowly, meticulously, tore it into sixteen equal pieces.

"Uhh, uh, Storm," he denied, gently. "Not a resignation. Leave of absence, yes--indefinite--but not a resignation."

"Why?" It was scarcely a question; Cloud's voice was level, uninflected. "I won't be worth the paper I'd waste."

"Now, no," the Lensman conceded, "but the future's another matter. I haven't said anything so far, because to anyone who knew you and Jo as I knew you it was abundantly clear that nothing could be said." Two hands gripped and held. "For the future, though, four words were uttered long ago, that have never been improved upon. 'This, too, shall pass.'"

"You think so?"

"I don't think so, Storm—I know so. I've been around a long time. You are too good a man, and the world has too much use for you, for you to go down permanently out of control. You've got a place in the world, and you'll be back—" A thought struck the Lensman, and he went on in an altered tone. "You wouldn't—of course you wouldn't—you couldn't."

"I don't think so. No, I won't—that never was any kind of a solution to any problem."

Nor was it. Until that moment, suicide had not entered Cloud's mind, and he rejected it instantly. His kind of man did not take the easy way out.

After a brief farewell Cloud made his way to an elevator and was whisked down to the garage. Into his big blue DeKhotinsky Sixteen Special and away.

Through traffic so heavy that front-, rear-, and side-bumpers almost touched he drove with the wonted cool skill; even though, consciously, he did not know that the other cars were there. He slowed, turned, stopped, "gave her the oof," all in correct response to flashing signals in all shapes and colors—purely automatically. Conscious, he did not know where he was going, nor care. If he thought at all, his numbed brain was simply trying to run away from its own bitter imaging—which, if he had thought at all, he would have known to be a hopeless task. But he did not think; he simply acted, dumbly, miserably. His eyes saw, optically; his body reacted, mechanically; his thinking
brain was completely in abeyance.

Into a one-way skyway he rocketed, along it over the suburbs and into the transcontinental super-highway. Edging inward, lane after lane, he reached the "unlimited" way--unlimited, that is, except for being limited to cars of not less than seven hundred horsepower, in perfect mechanical condition, driven by registered, tested drivers at speeds not less than one hundred and twenty-five miles an hour--flashed his registry number at the control station, and shoved his right foot down to the floor.

* * * * *

Now everyone knows that an ordinary DeKhotinsky Sporter will do a hundred and forty honestly-measured miles in one honestly measured hour; but very few ordinary drivers have ever found out how fast one of those brutal big souped-up Sixteens can wheel. They simply haven't got what it takes to open one up.

"Storm" Cloud found out that day. He held that two-and-a-half-ton Juggernaut on the road, wide open, for two solid hours. But it didn't help. Drive as he would, he could not outrun that which rode with him. Beside him and within him and behind him. For Jo was there. Jo and the kids, but mostly Jo. It was Jo's car as much as it was his. "Babe, the big blue ox," was Jo's pet name for it; because, like Paul Bunyan's fabulous beast, it was pretty nearly six feet between the eyes. Everything they had ever had was that way. She was in the seat beside him. Every dear, every sweet, every luscious, lovely memory of her was there ... and behind him, just out of eye-corner visibility, were the three kids. And a whole lifetime of this loomed ahead--a vista of emptiness more vacuous far than the emptiest reaches of intergalactic space. Damnation! He couldn't stand much more of--

High over the roadway, far ahead, a brilliant octagon flared red. That meant "STOP!" in any language. Cloud eased up his accelerator, eased down his mighty brakes. He pulled up at the control station and a trimly-uniformed officer made a gesture.

"Sorry, sir," the policemen said, "but you'll have to detour here. There's a loose atomic vortex beside the road up ahead--"

"Oh! It's Dr. Cloud!" Recognition flashed into the guard's eyes. "I didn't recognize you at first. You can go ahead, of course. It'll be two or three miles before you'll have to put on your armor; you'll know when better than anyone can tell you. They didn't tell us they were going to send for you. It's just a little new one, and the dope we got was that they were going to shove it off into the canyon with pressure."

"They didn't send for me." Cloud tried to smile. "I'm just driving around--haven't my armor along, even. So I guess I might as well go back."

He turned the Special around. A loose vortex--new. There might be a hundred of them, scattered over a radius of two hundred miles. Sisters of the one that had murdered his family--the hellish spawn of that accursed Number Eleven vortex that that damnably incompetent bungling ass had tried to blow up.... Into his mind there leaped a picture, wire-sharp, of Number Eleven as he had last seen it, and simultaneously an idea hit him like a blow from a fist.

He thought. Really thought, now; cogently, intensely, clearly. If he could do it ... could actually blow out the atomic flame of an atomic vortex ... not exactly revenge, but.... By Klono's brazen bowels, it would work--it'd have to work--he'd make it work! And grimly, quietly, but alive in every fiber now, he drove back toward the city practically as fast as he had come away.

* * * * *

If the Lensman was surprised at Cloud's sudden reappearance in the laboratory he did not show it. Nor did he offer any comment as his erstwhile first assistant went to various lockers and cupboards, assembling meters, coils, tubes, armor, and other paraphernalia and apparatus.

"Guess that's all I'll need, Chief," Cloud remarked, finally. "Here's a blank check. If some of this stuff shouldn't happen to be in usable condition when I get done with it, fill it out to suit, will you?"

"No," and the Lensman tore up the check just as he had torn up the resignation. "If you want the stuff for legitimate purposes, you're on Patrol business and it is the Patrol's risk. If, on the other hand, you think that you're going to try to snuff a vortex, the stuff stays here. That's final, Storm."

"You're right--and wrong, Phil," Cloud stated, not at all sheepishly. "I'm going to blow out Number One vortex with duodec, yes--but I'm really going to blow it out, not merely make a stab at it as an excuse for suicide, as you think."

"How?" The big Lensman's query was skepticism incarnate. "It can't be done, except by an almost impossibly fortuitous accident. You yourself have been the most bitterly opposed of us all to these suicidal attempts."

"I know it--I didn't have the solution myself until a few hours ago--it hit me all at once. Funny I never thought of it before; it's been right in sight all the time."

"That's the way with most problems," the Chief admitted. "Plain enough after you see the key equation. Well, I'm perfectly willing to be convinced, but I warn you that I'll take a lot of convincing--and someone else will do the
"When I get done you'll see why I'll pretty nearly have to do it myself. But to convince you, exactly what is the knot?"

"Variability," snapped the older man. "To be effective, the charge of explosive at the moment of impact must match, within very close limits, the activity of the vortex itself. Too small a charge scatters it around, in vortices which, while much smaller than the original, are still large enough to be self-sustaining. Too large a charge simply rekindles the original vortex—still larger—in its original crater. And the activity that must be matched varies so tremendously, in magnitude, maxima, and minima, and the cycle is so erratic—ranging from seconds to hours without discoverable rhyme or reason—that all attempts to do so at any predetermined instant have failed completely. Why, even Kinnison and Cardynge and the Conference of Scientists couldn't solve it, any more than they could work out a tractor beam that could be used as a tow-line on one."

"Not exactly," Cloud demurred. "They found that it could be forecast, for a few seconds at least—length of time directly proportional to the length of the cycle in question—by an extension of the calculus of warped surfaces."

"Humph!" the Lensman snorted. "So what? What good is a ten-second forecast when it takes a calculating machine an hour to solve the equations.... Oh!" He broke off, staring.

"Oh," he repeated, slowly, "I forgot that you're a lightning calculator—a mathematical prodigy from the day you were born—who never has to use a calculating machine even to compute an orbit.... But there are other things."

"I'll say there are; plenty of them. I'd thought of the calculator angle before, of course, but there was a worse thing than variability to contend with...."

"What?" the Lensman demanded.

"Fear," Cloud replied, crisply. "At the thought of a hand-to-hand battle with a vortex my brain froze solid. Fear—the sheer, stark, natural human fear of death, that robs a man of the fine edge of control and brings on the very death that he is trying so hard to avoid. That's what had me stopped."

"Right ... you may be right," the Lensman pondered, his fingers drumming quietly upon his desk. "And you are not afraid of death—now—even subconsciously. But tell me, Storm, please, that you won't invite it."

"I will not invite it, sir, now that I've got a job to do. But that's as far as I'll go in promising. I won't make any superhuman effort to avoid it. I'll take all due precautions, for the sake of the job, but if it gets me, what the hell? The quicker it does, the better—the sooner I'll be with Jo."

"You believe that?"

"Implicitly."

"The vortices are as good as gone, then. They haven't got any more chance than Boskone has of licking the Patrol."

"I'm afraid so," almost glumly. "The only way for it to get me is for me to make a mistake, and I don't feel any coming on."

"But what's your angle?" the Lensman asked, interest lighting his eyes. "You can't use the customary attack; your time will be too short."

"Like this," and, taking down a sheet of drafting paper, Cloud sketched rapidly. "This is the crater, here, with the vortex at the bottom, there. From the observers' instruments or from a shielded set-up of my own I get my data on mass, emission, maxima, minima, and so on. Then I have them make me three duodec bombs—one on the mark of the activity I'm figuring on shooting at, and one each five percent over and under that figure—cased in neocarballoy of exactly the computed thickness to last until it gets to the center of the vortex. Then I take off in a flying suit, armored and shielded, say about here...."

"If you take off at all, you'll take off in a suit, inside a one-man flitter," the Lensman interrupted. "Too many instruments for a suit, and you'll need more screen than a suit can deliver. We can adapt a flitter for bomb-throwing easily enough."

"QX; that would be better, of course. In that case, I set my flitter into a projectile trajectory like this, whose objective is the center of the vortex, there. See? Ten seconds or so away, at about this point, I take my instantaneous readings, solve the equations at that particular warped surface for some certain zero time...."

"But suppose that the cycle won't give you a ten-second solution?"

"Then I'll swing around and try again until a long cycle does show up."

"QX. It will, sometime."

"Sure. Then, having everything set for zero time, and assuming that the activity is somewhere near my postulated value...."

"Assume that it isn't—it probably won't be," the Chief grunted.

"I accelerate or decelerate—"

"Solving new equations all the while?"
"Sure--don't interrupt so--until at zero time the activity, extrapolated to zero time, matches one of my bombs. I cut that bomb loose, shoot myself off in a sharp curve, and Z-W-E-E-E-T--POWIE! She's out!" With an expressive, sweeping gesture.

"You hope," the Lensman was frankly dubious. "And there you are, right in the middle of that explosion, with two duodec bombs outside your armor--or just inside your flitter."

"Oh, no. I've shot them away several seconds ago, so that they explode somewhere else, nowhere near me."

"I hope. But do you realize just how busy a man you are going to be during those ten or twelve seconds?"

"Fully." Cloud's face grew somber. "But I will be in full control. I won't be afraid of anything that can happen--anything. And," he went on, under his breath, "that's the hell of it."

"QX," the Lensman admitted finally, "you can go. There are a lot of things you haven't mentioned, but you'll probably be able to work them out as you go along. I think I'll go out and work with the boys in the lookout station while you're doing your stuff. When are you figuring on starting?"

"How long will it take to get the flitter ready?"

"A couple of days. Say we meet you there Saturday morning?"

"Saturday the tenth, at eight o'clock. I'll be there."

* * * * *

And again Neal Cloud and Babe, the big blue ox, hit the road. And as he rolled the physicist mulled over in his mind the assignment to which he had set himself.

Like fire, only worse, intra-atomic energy was a good servant, but a terrible master. Man had liberated it before he could really control it. In fact, control was not yet, and perhaps never would be, perfect. Up to a certain size and activity, yes. They, the millions upon millions of self-limiting ones, were the servants. They could be handled, fenced in, controlled; indeed, if they were not kept under an exciting bombardment and very carefully fed, they would go out. But at long intervals, for some one of a dozen reasons--science knew so little, fundamentally, of the true inwardness of the intra-atomic reactions--one of these small, tame, self-limiting vortices flared, nova-like, into a large, wild, self-sustaining one. It ceased being a servant then, and became a master. Such flare-ups occurred, perhaps, only once or twice in a century on Earth; the trouble was that they were so utterly, damnable permanent. They never went out. And no data were ever secured: for every living thing in the vicinity of a flare-up died; every instrument and every other solid thing within a radius of a hundred feet melted down into the reeking, boiling slag of its crater.

Fortunately, the rate of growth was slow--as slow, almost, as it was persistent--otherwise Civilization would scarcely have had a planet left. And unless something could be done about loose vortices before too many years, the consequences would be really serious. That was why his laboratory had been established in the first place.

Nothing much had been accomplished so far. The tractor beam that would take hold of them had never been designed. Nothing material was of any use; it melted. Pressors worked, after a fashion: it was by the use of these beams that they shoved the vortices around, off into the waste places--unless it proved cheaper to allow the places where they had come into being to remain waste places. A few, through sheer luck, had been blown into self-limiting bits by duodec. Duodecaplylatomate, the most powerful, the most frightfully detonant explosive ever invented upon all the known planets of the First Galaxy. But duodec had taken an awful toll of life. Also, since it usually scattered a vortex instead of extinguishing it, duodec had actually caused far more damage than it had cured.

No end of fantastic schemes had been proposed, of course; of varying degrees of fantasy. Some of them sounded almost practical. Some of them had been tried; some of them were still being tried. Some, such as the perennially-appearing one of building a huge hemispherical hull in the ground under and around the vortex, installing an inertialless drive, and shooting the whole neighborhood out into space, were perhaps feasible from an engineering standpoint. They were, however, potentially so capable of making things worse that they would not be tried save as last-ditch measures. In short, the control of loose vortices was very much an unsolved problem.

* * * * *

Number One vortex, the oldest and worst upon Tellus, had been pushed out into the Badlands; and there, at eight o'clock on the tenth, Cloud started to work upon it.

The "lookout station," instead of being some such ramshackle structure as might have been deduced from the Lensman's casual terminology, was in fact a fully-equipped observatory. Its staff was not large--eight men worked in three staggered eight-hour shifts of two men each--but the instruments! To develop them had required hundreds of man-years of time and near-miracles of research, not the least of the problems having been that of developing shielded conductors capable of carrying truly through five-ply screens of force the converted impulses of the very radiations against which those screens were most effective. For the observatory, and the one long approach to it as well, had to be screened heavily; without such protection no life could exist there.

This problem and many others had been solved, however, and there the instruments were. Every phase and
factor of the vortex's existence and activity were measured and recorded continuously, throughout every minute of
every day of every year. And all of these records were summed up, integrated, into the "Sigma" curve. This curve,
while only an incredibly and senselessly tortuous line to the layman's eye, was a veritable mine of information to the
initiate.

Cloud glanced along the Sigma curve of the previous forty-eight hours and scowled, for one jagged peak,
scarcely an hour old, actually punched through the top line of the chart.
"Bad, huh, Frank?" he grunted.
"Plenty bad, Storm, and getting worse," the observer assented. "I wouldn't wonder if Carlowitz were right, after
all--if she ain't getting ready to blow her top I'm a Zabriskan fontema's maiden aunt."
"No periodicity--no equation, of course." It was a statement, not a question. The Lensman ignored as
completely as did the observer, if not as flippantly, the distinct possibility that at any moment the observatory and all
that it contained might be resolved into their component atoms.

"None whatever," came flatly from Cloud. He did not need to spend hours at a calculating machine; at one
glance he knew, without knowing how he knew, that no equation could be made to fit even the weighted-average
 locus of that wildly-shifting Sigma curve. "But most of the cycles cut this ordinate here--seven fifty-one--so I'll take
that for my value. That means nine point nine oh six kilograms of duodec basic charge, with one five percent over
and one five percent under that for alternates. Neocarballoy casing, fifty-three millimeters on the basic, others in
proportion. On the wire?"
"It went out as you said it," the observer reported. "They'll have 'em here in fifteen minutes."
"QX--I'll get dressed, then."

The Lensman and the observer helped him into his cumbersome, heavily-padded armor. They checked his
instruments, making sure that the protective devices of the suit were functioning at full efficiency. Then all three
went out to the flitter. A tiny speedster, really; a torpedo bearing the stubby wings and the ludicrous tail-surfaces, the
multifarious driving-, braking-, side-, top-, and under-jets so characteristic of the tricky, cranky, but ultra-
maneuverable breed. But this one had something that the ordinary speedster or flitter did not carry; spaced around
the needle beak there yawned the open muzzles of a triplex bomb-thrower.

More checking. The Lensman and the armored Cloud both knew that every one of the dozens of instruments
upon the flitter's special board was right to the hair; nevertheless each one was compared with the master-instrument
of the observatory.

The bombs arrived and were loaded in; and Cloud, with a casually-waved salute, stepped into the tiny operating
compartment. The massive door--flitters have no airlocks, as the whole midsection is scarcely bigger than an airlock
would have to be--rammed shut upon its fiber gaskets, the heavy toggles drove home. A cushioned form closed in
upon the pilot, leaving only his arms and lower legs free.

Then, making sure that his two companions had ducked for cover, Cloud shot his flitter into the air and toward
the seething inferno which was Loose Atomic Vortex Number One. For it was seething, no fooling; and it was an
inferno. The crater was a ragged, jagged hole a full mile from lip to lip and perhaps a quarter of that in depth. It was
not, however, a perfect cone, for the floor, being largely incandescently molten, was practically level except for a
depression at the center, where the actual vortex lay. The walls of the pit were steeply, unstably irregular, varying in
pitch and shape with the hardness and refractoriness of the strata composing them. Now a section would glare into
an unbearably blinding white puffing away in sparkling vapor. Again, cooled by an inrushing blast of air, it would
subside into an angry scarlet, its surface crawling in a sluggish flow of lava. Occasionally a part of the wall might
even go black, into pock-marked scoriae or into brilliant planes of obsidian.

For always, somewhere, there was an enormous volume of air pouring into that crater. It rushed in as ordinary
air. It came out, however, in a ragingly-uprushing pillar, as--as something else. No one knew--or knows yet, for that
matter--exactly what a loose vortex does to the molecules and atoms of air. In fact, due to the extreme variability
already referred to, it probably does not do the same thing for more than an instant at a time.

That there is little actual combustion is certain; that is, except for the forced combination of nitrogen, argon,
xenon, and krypton with oxygen. There is, however, consumption: plenty of consumption. And what that incredibly
intense bombardment impinges up is ... is altered. Profoundly and obscurely altered, so that the atmosphere emitted
from the crater is quite definitely no longer air as we know it. It may be corrosive, it may be poisonous in one or
another of a hundred fashions, it may be merely new and different; but it is no longer the air which we human beings
are used to breathing. And it is this fact, rather than the destruction of the planet itself, which would end the
possibility of life upon Earth's surface.

It is difficult indeed to describe the appearance of a loose atomic vortex to those who have never seen one; and,
fortunately, most people never have. And practically all of its frightful radiation lies in those octaves of the spectrum which are invisible to the human eye. Suffice it to say, then, that it had an average effective surface temperature of about fifteen thousand degrees absolute--two and one-half times as hot as the sun of Tellus--and that it was radiating every frequency possible to that incomprehensible temperature, and let it go at that.

And Neal Cloud, scurrying in his flitter through that murky, radiation-riddled atmosphere, setting up equations from the readings of his various meters and gauges and solving those equations almost instantaneously in his mathematical-prodigy's mind, sat appalled. For the activity level was, and even in its lowest dips remained, far above the level he had selected. His skin began to prickle and to burn. His eyes began to smart and to ache. He knew what those symptoms meant; even the flitter's powerful screens were not stopping all the radiation; even his suit-screens and his special goggles were not stopping what leaked through. But he wouldn't quit yet; the activity might--probably would--take a nose-dive any instant. If it did, he'd have to be ready. On the other hand, it might blow up at any instant, too.

There were two schools of mathematical thought upon that point. One held that the vortex, without any essential change in its physical condition or nature, would keep on growing bigger. Indefinitely, until, uniting with the other vortices of the planet, it had converted the entire mass of the world into energy.

The second school, of which the forementioned Carlowitz was the loudest voice, taught that at a certain stage of development the internal energy of the vortex would become so great that generation-radiation equilibrium could not be maintained. This would, of course, result in an explosion; the nature and consequences of which this Carlowitz was wont to dwell upon in ghoulishly mathematical glee. Neither school, however, could prove its point--or, rather, each school proved its point, by means of unimpeachable mathematics--and each hated and derided the other, loudly and heatedly.

And now Cloud, as he studied through his almost opaque defenses that indescribably ravening fireball, that esuriently rapacious monstrosity which might very well have come from the deepest pit of the hottest hell of mythology, felt strongly inclined to agree with Carlowitz. It didn't seem possible that anything could get any worse than that without exploding. And such an explosion, he felt sure, would certainly blow everything for miles around into the smitheriest kind of smithereens.

The activity of the vortex stayed high, 'way too high. The tiny control room of the flitter grew hotter and hotter. His skin burned and his eyes ached worse. He touched a communicator stud and spoke.

"Phil? Better get me three more bombs. Like these, except up around...."
"I don't check you. If you do that, it's apt to drop to a minimum and stay there," the Lensman reminded him. "It's completely unpredictable, you know."
"It may, at that ... so I'll have to forget the five percent margin and hit it on the nose or not at all. Order me up two more, then--one at half of what I've got here, the other double it," and he reeled off the figures for the charge and the casing of the explosive. "You might break out a jar of burn-dressing, too. Some fairly hot stuff is leaking through."

"We'll do that. Come down, fast!"

Cloud landed. He stripped to the skin and the observer smeared his every square inch of epidermis with the thick, gooey stuff that was not only a highly efficient screen against radiation, but also a sovereign remedy for new radiation burns. He exchanged his goggles for a thicker, darker, heavier pair. The two bombs arrived and were substituted for two of the original load.

"I thought of something while I was up there," Cloud informed the observers then. "Twenty kilograms of duodec is nobody's firecracker, but it may be the least of what's going to go off. Have you got any idea of what's going to become of the energy inside that vortex when I blow it out?"
"Can't say that I have." The Lensman frowned in thought. "No data."
"Neither have I. But I'd say that you better go back to the new station--the one you were going to move to if it kept on getting worse."
"But the instruments...." the Lensman was thinking, not of the instruments themselves, which were valueless in comparison with life, but of the records those instruments would make. Those records were priceless.

"I'll have everything on the tapes in the flitter," Cloud reminded.
"But suppose...."
"That the flitter stops one, too--or doesn't stop it, rather? In that case, your back station won't be there, either, so it won't make any difference." How mistaken Cloud was!
"QX," the Chief decided. "We'll leave when you do--just in case."

Again in air, Cloud found that the activity, while still high, was not too high, but that it was fluctuating too rapidly. He could not get even five seconds of trustworthy prediction, to say nothing of ten. So he waited, as close as
he dared remain to that horrible center of disintegration.

The flitter hung poised in air, motionless, upon softly hissing under-jets. Cloud knew to a fraction his height above the ground. He knew to a fraction his distance from the vortex. He knew with equal certainty the density of the atmosphere and the exact velocity and direction of the wind. Hence, since he could also read closely enough the momentary variations in the cyclonic storms within the crater, he could compute very easily the course and velocity necessary to land the bomb in the exact center of the vortex at any given instant of time. The hard part—the thing that no one had as yet succeeded in doing—was to predict, for a time far enough ahead to be of any use, a usably close approximation to the vortex's quantitative activity. For, as has been said, he had to over-blast, rather than under-, if he could not hit it "on the nose;" to under-blast would scatter it all over the state.

Therefore Cloud concentrated upon the dials and gauges before him; concentrated with every fiber of his being and every cell of his brain.

Suddenly, almost imperceptibly, the Sigma curve gave signs of flattening out. In that instant Cloud's mind pounced. Simultaneous equations: nine of them, involving nine unknowns. An integration in four dimensions. No matter—Cloud did not solve them laboriously, one factor at a time. Without knowing how he had arrived at it, he knew the answer; just as the Posenian or the Rigellian is able to perceive every separate component particle of an opaque, three-dimensional solid, but without being able to explain to anyone how his sense of perception works. It just is, that's all.

Anyway, by virtue of whatever sense or ability it is which makes a mathematical prodigy what he is, Cloud knew that in exactly eight and three-tenths seconds from that observed instant the activity of the vortex would be slightly—but not too far—under the coefficient of his heaviest bomb. Another flick of his mental trigger and he knew the exact velocity he would require. His hand swept over the studs, his right foot tramped down, hard, upon the firing lever; and, even as the quivering flitter shot forward under eight Tellurian gravities of acceleration, he knew to the thousandth of a second how long he would have to hold that acceleration to attain that velocity. While not really long—in seconds—it was much too long for comfort. It took him much closer to the vortex than he wanted to be; in fact, it took him right out over the crater itself.

But he stuck to the calculated course, and at the precisely correct instant he cut his drive and released his largest bomb. Then, so rapidly that it was one blur of speed, he again kicked on his eight G's of drive and started to whirl around as only a speedster or a flitter can whirl. Practically unconscious from the terrific resultant of the linear and angular accelerations, he ejected the two smaller bombs. He did not care particularly where they lit, just so they didn't light in the crater or near the observatory, and he had already made certain of that. Then, without waiting even to finish the whirl or to straighten her out in level flight, Cloud's still-flying hand darted toward the switch whose closing would energize the Bergenholm and make the flitter inertialess.

Too late. Hell was out for noon, with the little speedster still inert. Cloud had moved fast, too; trained mind and trained body had been working at top speed and in perfect coordination. There just simply hadn't been enough time. If he could have got what he wanted, ten full seconds, or even nine, he could have made it, but....

In spite of what happened, Cloud defended his action, then and thereafter. Damnitall, he had to take the eight-point-three second reading! Another tenth of a second and his bomb wouldn't have fitted—he didn't have the five percent leeway he wanted, remember. And no, he couldn't wait for another match, either. His screens were leaking like sieves, and if he had waited for another chance they would have picked him up fried to a greasy cinder in his own lard!

The bomb sped truly and struck the target in direct central impact, exactly as scheduled. It penetrated perfectly. The neocarbalooy casing lasted just long enough—that frightful charge of duodec exploded, if not exactly at the center of the vortex, at least near enough to the center to do the work. In other words, Cloud's figuring had been close—very close. But the time had been altogether too short.

The flitter was not even out of the crater when the bomb went off. And not only the bomb. For Cloud's vague forebodings were materialized, and more; the staggeringly immense energy of the vortex merged with that of the detonating duodec to form an utterly incomprehensible whole.

In part the hellish flood of boiling lava in that devil's cauldron was beaten downward into a bowl by the sheer, stupendous force of the blow; in part it was hurled abroad in masses, in gouts and streamers. And the raging wind of the explosion's front seized the fragments and tore and worried them to bits, hurling them still faster along their paths of violence. And air, so densely compressed as to be to all intents and purposes a solid, smote the walls of the crater. Smote them so that they crumbled, crushed outward through the hard-packed ground, broke up into jaggedly irregular blocks which hurtled, screamingly, away through the atmosphere.

Also the concussion wave, or the explosion front, or flying fragments, or something, struck the two loose bombs, so that they too exploded and added their contribution to the already stupendous concentration of force.
They were not close enough to the flyer to wreck it of themselves, but they were close enough so that they didn't do her—or her pilot—a bit of good.

The first terrific wave buffeted the flyer while Cloud's right hand was in the air, shooting across the panel to turn on the Berg. The impact jerked the arm downward and sidewise, both bones of the forearm snapping as it struck the ledge. The second one, an instant later, broke his left leg. Then the debris began to arrive.

Chunks of solid or semi-molten rock slammed against the hull, knocking off wings and control-surfaces. Gobs of viscous slag slapped it liquidly, freezing into and clogging up jets and orifices. The little ship was hurled hither and yon, in the grip of forces she could no more resist than can the floating leaf resist the waters of a cataract. And Cloud's brain was as addled as an egg by the vicious concussions which were hitting him from so many different directions and so nearly all at once. Nevertheless, with his one arm and his one leg and the few cells of his brain that were still at work, the physicist was still in the fight.

By sheer force of will and nerve he forced his left hand across the gyrating key-bank to the Bergenholm switch. He snapped it, and in the instant of its closing a vast, calm peace descended, blanket-like. For, fortunately, the Berg still worked; the flyer and all her contents and appurtenances were inertialess. Nothing material could buffet her or hurt her now; she would waft effortlessly away from a feather's lightest possible touch.

Cloud wanted to faint then, but he didn't—quite. Instead, foggily, he tried to look back at the crater. Nine-tenths of his visiplates were out of commission, but he finally got a view. Good—it was out. He wasn't surprised; he had been quite confident that it would be. It wasn't scattered around, either. It couldn't be, for his only possibility of smearing the shot was on the upper side, not the lower.

* * * * *

His next effort was to locate the secondary observatory, where he had to land, and in that too he was successful. He had enough intelligence left to realize that, with practically all of his jets clogged and his wings and tail shot off, he couldn't land his little vessel inert. Therefore he would have to land her free.

And by dint of light and extremely unorthodox use of what jets he had left in usable shape he did land her free, almost within the limits of the observatory's field; and having landed, he inerted her.

But, as has been intimated, his brain was not working so well; he had held his ship inertialless quite a few seconds longer than he thought, and he did not even think of the buffetings she had taken. As a result of these things, however, her intrinsic velocity did not match, anywhere near exactly, that of the ground upon which she lay. Thus, when Cloud cut his Bergenholm, restoring thereby to the flyer the absolute velocity and inertia she had had before going free, there resulted a distinctly anti-climactic crash.

There was a last terrific bump as the motionless vessel collided with the equally motionless ground; and "Storm" Cloud, vortex blaster, went out like the proverbial light.

Help came, of course; and on the double. The pilot was unconscious and the flyer's door could not be opened from the outside, but those were not insuperable obstacles. A plate, already loose, was sheared away; the pilot was carefully lifted out of his prison and rushed to Base Hospital in the "meat-can" already in attendance.

And later, in a private office of that hospital, the gray-clad Chief of the Atomic Research Laboratory sat and waited—but not patiently.

"How is he, Lacy?" he demanded, as the Surgeon-General entered the room. "He's going to live, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, Phil—definitely yes," Lacy replied, briskly. "He has a good skeleton, very good indeed. The burns are superficial and will yield quite readily to treatment. The deeper, delayed effects of the radiation to which he was exposed can be neutralized entirely effectively. Thus he will not need even a Phillips's treatment for the replacement of damaged parts, except possibly for a few torn muscles and so on."

"But he was smashed up pretty badly, wasn't he? I know that he had a broken arm and a broken leg, at least."

"Simple fractures only—entirely negligible." Lacy waved aside with an airy gesture such small ills as broken bones. "He'll be out in a few weeks."

"How soon can I see him?" the Lensman-physicist asked. "There are some important things to take up with him, and I've got a personal message for him that I must give him as soon as possible."

Lacy pursed his lips. Then:

"You may see him now," he decided. "He is conscious, and strong enough. Not too long, though, Phil—fifteen minutes at most."

"QX, and thanks," and a nurse led the visiting Lensman to Cloud's bedside.

"Hi, Stupe!" he boomed, cheerfully. "'Stupe' being short for stupendous, not 'stupid'."

"Hi, Chief. Glad to see somebody. Sit down."

"You're the most-wanted man in the Galaxy," the visitor informed the invalid, "not excepting even Kimball Kinnison. Look at this spool of tape, and it's only the first one. I brought it along for you to read at your leisure. As soon as any planet finds out that we've got a sure-enough vortex-blower-outer, an expert who can really call his
shots--and the news travels mighty fast--that planet sends in a double-urgent, Class A-Prime demand for first call upon your services.

"Sirius IV got in first by a whisker, it seems, but Aldebaran II was so close a second that it was a photo finish, and all the channels have been jammed ever since. Canopus, Vega, Rigel, Spica. They all want you. Everybody, from Alsakan to Vandemar and back. We told them right off that we would not receive personal delegations--we had to almost throw a couple of pink-haired Chickladarians out bodily to make them believe that we meant it--and that the age and condition of the vortex involved, not priority of requisition, would govern, QX?"

"Absolutely," Cloud agreed. "That's the only way it could be, I should think."

"So forget about this psychic trauma.... No, I don't mean that," the Lensman corrected himself hastily. "You know what I mean. The will to live is the most important factor in any man's recovery, and too many worlds need you too badly to have you quit now. Not?"

"I suppose so," Cloud acquiesced, but somberly. "I'll get out of here in short order. And I'll keep on pecking away until one of those vortices finishes what this one started."

"You'll die of old age then, son," the Lensman assured him. "We got full data--all the information we need. We know exactly what to do to your screens. Next time nothing will come through except light, and only as much of that as you feel like admitting. You can wait as close to a vortex as you please, for as long as you please; until you get exactly the activity and time-interval that you want. You will be just as comfortable and just as safe as though you were home in bed."

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely--or at least, as sure as we can be of anything that hasn't happened yet. But I see that your guardian angel here is eyeing her clock somewhat pointedly, so I'd better be doing a flit before they toss me down a shaft. Clear ether, Storm!"

"Clear ether, Chief!"

And that is how "Storm" Cloud, atomic physicist, became the most narrowly-specialized specialist in all the annals of science: how he became "Storm" Cloud, Vortex Blaster--the Galaxy's only vortex blaster.

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**Contents**

THE PLANET OF DREAD
By R. F. Starzl

A stupid blunder--and Mark Forepaugh faces a life of castaway loneliness in the savage welter of the planet Inra's monster-ridden jungles.

There was no use hiding from the truth. Somebody had blundered--a fatal blunder--and they were going to pay for it! Mark Forepaugh kicked the pile of hydrogen cylinders. Only a moment ago he had broken the seals--the mendacious seals that certified to the world that the flasks were fully charged. And the flasks were empty! The supply of this precious power gas, which in an emergency should have been sufficient for six years, simply did not exist.

He walked over to the integrating machine, which as early as the year 2031 had begun to replace the older atomic processes, due to the shortage of the radium series metals. It was bulky and heavy compared to the atomic disintegrators, but it was much more economical and very dependable. Dependable--provided some thick-headed stock clerk at a terrestrial supply station did not check in empty hydrogen cylinders instead of full ones. Forepaugh's unwonted curses brought a smile to the stupid, good-natured face of his servant, Gunga--he who had been banished for life from his native Mars for his impiety in closing his single round eye during the sacred Ceremony of the Wells.

The Earth man was at this steaming hot, unhealthful trading station under the very shadow of the South Pole of the minor planet Inra for an entirely different reason. One of the most popular of his set on the Earth, an athletic hero, he had fallen in love, and the devoutly wished-for marriage was only prevented by lack of funds. The opportunity to take charge of this richly paid, though dangerous, outpost of civilization had been no sooner offered than taken. In another week or two the relief ship was due to take him and his valuable collection of exotic Inranian orchids back to the Earth, back to a fat bonus, Constance, and an assured future.

It was a different young man who now stood tragically before the useless power plant. His slim body was bowed, and his clean features were drawn. Grimly he raked the cooling dust that had been forced in the integrating
chamber by the electronic rearrangement of the original hydrogen atoms--finely powdered iron and silicon--the "ashes" of the last tank of hydrogen.

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Gunga chuckled.

"What's the matter?" Forepaugh barked. "Going crazy already?"

"Me, haw! Me, haw! Me thinkin'," Gunga rumbled. "Haw! We got, haw! plenty hydr'gen." He pointed to the low metal roof of the trading station. Though it was well insulated against sound, the place continually vibrated to the low murmur of the Inranian rains that fell interminably through the perpetual polar day. It was a rain such as is never seen on Earth, even in the tropics. It came in drops as large as a man's fist. It came in streams. It came in large, shattering masses that broke before they fell and filled the air with spray. There was little wind, but the steady green downpour of water and the brilliant continuous flashing of lightning shamed the dull soggy twilight produced by the large, hot, but hidden sun.

"Your idea of a joke!" Forepaugh growled in disgust. He understood what Gunga's grim pleasantry referred to. There was indeed an incalculable quantity of hydrogen at hand. If some means could be found to separate the hydrogen atoms from the oxygen in the world of water around them they would not lack for fuel. He thought of electrolysis, and relaxed with a sigh. There was no power. The generators were dead, the air drier and cooler had ceased its rhythmic pulsing nearly an hour ago. Their lights were gone, and the automatic radio utterly useless.

"This is what comes of putting all your eggs in one basket," he thought, and let his mind dwell vindictively on the engineers who had designed the equipment on which his life depended.

An exclamation from Gunga startled him. The Martian was pointing to the ventilator opening, the only part of this strange building that was not hermetically sealed against the hostile life of Inra. A dark rim had appeared at its margin, a loathsome, black-green rim that was moving, spreading out. It crept over the metal walls like the low-lying smoke of a fire, yet it was a solid. From it emanated a strong, miasmatic odor.

"The giant mold!" Forepaugh cried. He rushed to his desk and took out his flash pistol, quickly set the localizer so as to cover a large area. When he turned he saw, to his horror, Gunga about to smash into the mold with his ax. He sent the man spinning with a blow to the ear.

"Want to scatter it and start it growing in a half-dozen places?" he snapped. "Here!"

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He pulled the trigger. There was a light, spiteful "ping" and for an instant a cone of white light stood out in the dim room like a solid thing. Then it was gone, and with it was gone the black mold, leaving a circular area of blistered paint on the wall and an acrid odor in the air. Forepaugh leaped to the ventilating louver and closed it tightly.

"It's going to be like this from now on," he remarked to the shaken Gunga. "All these things wouldn't bother us as long as the machinery kept the building dry and cool. They couldn't live in here. But it's getting damp and hot. Look at the moisture condensing on the ceiling!"

Gunga gave a guttural cry of despair. "It knows, Boss; look!"

Through one of the round, heavily framed ports it could be seen, the lower part of its large, shapeless body half-floating in the lashing water that covered their rocky shelf to a depth of several feet, the upper part spectral and gray. It was a giant amoeba, fully six feet in diameter in its present spheroid form, but capable of assuming any shape that would be useful. It had an envelope of tough, transparent matter, and was filled with a fluid that was now cloudy and then clear. Near the center there was a mass of darker matter, and this was undoubtedly the seat of its intelligence.

The Earth man recoiled in horror! A single cell with a brain! It was unthinkable. It was a biological nightmare. Never before had he seen one--had, in fact, dismissed the stories of the Inranian natives as a bit of primitive superstition, had laughed at these gentle, stupid amphibians with whom he traded when they, in their imperfect language, tried to tell him of it.

They had called it the Ul-lul. Well, let it be so. It was an amoeba, and it was watching him. It floated in the downpour and watched him. With what? It had no eyes. No matter, it was watching him. And then it suddenly flowed outward until it became a disc rocking on the waves. Again its fluid form changed, and by a series of elongations and contractions it flowed through the water at an incredible speed. It came straight for the window, struck the thick, unbreakable glass with a shock that could be felt by the men inside. It flowed over the glass and over the building. It was trying to eat them, building and all! The part of its body over the port became so thin that it was almost invisible. At last, its absolute limit reached, it dropped away, baffled, vanishing amid the glare of the lightning and the frothing waters like the shadows of a nightmare.

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The heat was intolerable and the air was bad.

"Haw, we have to open vent'lator, Boss!" gasped the Martian.
Forepaugh nodded grimly. It wouldn't do to smother either. Though to open the ventilator would be to invite another invasion by the black mold, not to mention the amoebae and other fabulous monsters that had up to now been kept at a safe distance by the repeller zone, a simple adaptation of a very old discovery. A zone of mechanical vibrations, of a frequency of 500,000 cycles per second, was created by a large quartz crystal in the water, which was electrically operated. Without power, the protective zone had vanished.

"We watch?" asked Gunga.
"You bet we watch. Every minute of the 'day' and 'night.'"

He examined the two chronometers, assuring himself that they were well wound, and congratulated himself that they were not dependent on the defunct power plant for energy. They were his only means of measuring the passage of time. The sun, which theoretically would seem to travel round and round the horizon, rarely succeeded in making its exact location known, but appeared to shift strangely from side to side at the whim of the fog and water.

"Th' fellas," Gunga remarked, coming out of a study. "Why not come?" He referred to the Inranians.
"Probably know something's wrong. They can tell the quartz oscillator is stopped. Afraid of the Ul-lul, I suppose."
"'Squeer," demurred the Martian. "Ul-lul not bother fellas."
"You mean it doesn't follow them into the underbrush. But it would find tough going there. Not enough water; trees there, four hundred feet high with thorny roots and rough bark--they wouldn't like that. Oh no, these natives ought to be pretty snug in their dens. Why, they're as hard to catch as a muskrat! Don't know what a muskrat is, huh? Well, it's the same as the Inranians, only different, and not so ugly."

For the next six days they existed in their straitened quarters, one guarding while the other slept, but such alarms as they experienced were of a minor nature, easily disposed of by their flash pistol. It had not been intended for continuous service, and under the frequent drains it showed an alarming loss of power. Forepaugh repeatedly warned Gunga to be more sparing in its use, but that worthy persisted in his practice of using it against every trifling invasion of the poisonous Inranian cave moss that threatened them, or the warm, soggy water-spiders that hopefully explored the ventilator shaft in search of living food.

"Bash 'em with a broom, or something! Never mind if it isn't nice. Save our flash gun for something bigger." Gunga only looked distressed.

On the seventh day their position became untenable. Some kind of sea creature, hidden under the ever-replenished storm waters, had found the concrete emplacements of their trading post to its liking. Just how it was done was never learned. It is doubtful that the creatures could gnaw away the solid stone--more likely the process was chemical, but none the less it was effective. The foundations crumbled; the metal shell subsided, rolled half over so that silty water leaked in through the straining seams, and threatened at any moment to be buffeted and urged away on the surface of the flood toward that distant vast sea which covers nine-tenths of the area of Inra.

"Time to mush for the mountains," Forepaugh decided.

Gunga grinned. The Mountains of Perdition were, to his point of view, the only part of Inra even remotely inhabitable. They were sometimes fairly cool, and though perpetually pelted with rain, blazing with lightning and reverberating with thunder, they had caves that were fairly dry and too cool for the black mold. Sometimes, under favorable circumstances on their rugged peaks, one could get the full benefit of the enormous hot sun for whose actinic rays the Martian's starved system yearned.

"Better pack a few cans of the food tablets," the white man ordered. "Take a couple of waterproof sleeping bags for us, and a few hundred fire pellets. You can have the flash pistol; it may have a few more charges in it."

Forepaugh broke the glass case marked "Emergency Only" and removed two more flash pistols. Well he knew that he would need them after passing beyond the trading area--perhaps sooner. His eyes fell on his personal chest, and he opened it for a brief examination. None of the contents seemed of any value, and he was about to pass when he dragged out a long, heavy, .45 caliber six-shooter in a holster, and a cartridge belt filled with shells. The Martian stared.

"Know what it is?" his master asked, handing him the weapon.
"Gunga not know." He took it and examined it curiously. It was a fine museum piece in an excellent state of preservation, the metal overlaid with the patina of age, but free from rust and corrosion.

"It's a weapon of the Ancients," Forepaugh explained. "It was a sort of family heirloom and is over 300 years old. One of my grandfathers used it in the famous Northwest Mounted Police. Wonder if it'll still shoot."

He leveled the weapon at a fat, sightless wriggler that came squirming through a seam, squinting unaccustomed eyes along the barrel. There was a violent explosion, and the wriggler disappeared in a smear of dirty green. Gunga nearly fell over backward in fright, and even Forepaugh was shaken. He was surprised that the ancient cartridge had
exploded at all, though he knew powder making had reached a high level of perfection before explosive chemical
weapons had yielded to the newer, lighter, and infinitely more powerful ray weapons. The gun would impede their
progress. It would be of very little use against the giant Carnivora of Inra. Yet something—perhaps a sentimental
attachment, perhaps what his ancestors would have called a "hunch"—compelled him to strap it around his waist. He
carefully packed a few essentials in his knapsack, together with one chronometer and a tiny gyroscopic compass. So
equipped, they could travel with a fair degree of precision toward the mountains some hundred miles on the other
side of a steaming forest, a-crawl with feral life, and hot with blood-lust.

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Man and master descended into the warm waters and, without a backward glance, left the trading post to its
fate. There was not even any use in leaving a note. Their relief ship, soon due, would never find the station without
radio direction.

The current was strong, but the water gradually became shallower as they ascended the sloping rock. After half
an hour they saw ahead of them the loom of the forest, and with some trepidation they entered the gloom cast by the
towering, fernlike trees, whose tops disappeared in murky fog. Tangled vines impeded their progress. Quagmires lay
in wait for them, and tough weeds tripped them, sometimes throwing one or another into the mud among squirming
small reptiles that lashed at them with spiked, poisonous feet and then fell to pieces, each piece to lie in the bubbling
ooze until it grew again into a whole animal.

Several times they almost walked under the bodies of great, spheroidal creatures with massive short legs,
whose tremendously long, sinuous necks disappeared in the leafy murk above, swaying gently like long-stalked
lilies in a terrestrial pond. These were azornacks, mild-tempered vegetarians whose only defense lay in their thick,
blubbery hides. Filled with parasites, stinking and rancid, their decaying covering of fat effectively concealed the
tender flesh underneath, protecting them from fangs and rending claws.

Deeper in the forest the battering of the rain was mitigated. Giant neo-palm leaves formed a roof that shut out
not only most of the weak daylight, but also the fury of the downpour. The water collected in cataracts, ran down the
boles of the trees, and roared through the semi-circular canals of the snake trees, so named by early explorers for
their waving, rubbery tentacles, multiplied a millionfold, that performed the duties of leaves. Water gurgled and
chuckled everywhere, spread in vast dim ponds and lakes writhing with tormented roots, up-heaved by unseen,
uncatalogued leviathans, rippled by translucent discs of loathsome, luminescent jelly that quivered from place to
place in pursuit of microscopic prey.

Yet the impression was one of calm and quiet, and the waifs from other worlds felt a surcease of nervous
tension. Unconsciously they relaxed. Taking their bearings, they changed their course slightly for the nesting place
of the nearest tribe of Inranians where they hoped to get food and at least partial shelter; for their food tablets had
mysteriously turned to an unpleasant viscous liquid, and their sleeping bags were alive with giant bacteria easily
visible to the eye.

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They were doomed to disappointment. After nearly twelve hours of desperate struggling through the morass,
through gloomy aisles, and countless narrow escapes from prowling beasts of prey in which only the speed and
tremendous power of their flash pistols saved them from instant death, they reached a rocky outcropping which led
to the comparatively dry rise of land on which a tribe of Inranians made its home. Their faces were covered with
welts made by the hanging filaments of blood-sucking trees as fine as spider webs, and their senses reeled with the
oppressive stench of the abysmal jungle. If the pampered ladies of the Inner Planets only knew where their
thousand-dollar orchids sprang from!

Converging runways showed the opening of one of the underground dens, almost hidden from view by a
bewildering maze of roots, rendered more formidable by long, sharp stakes made from the iron-hard thigh-bones of
the flying kabo.

Forepaugh cupped his hands over his mouth and gave the call.
"Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf!"

He repeated it over and over, the jungle giving back his voice in a muffled echo, while Gunga held a spare flash
pistol and kept a sharp lookout for a carnivore intent on getting an unwary Inranian.

There was no answer. These timid creatures, who are often rated the most intelligent life native to primitive
Inra, had sensed disaster and had fled.

Forepaugh and Gunga slept in one of the foul, poorly ventilated dens, ate of the hard, woody tubers that had not
been worth taking along, and wished they had a certain stock clerk at that place at that time. They were awakened
out of deep slumber by the threshing of an evil looking creature which had become entangled among the sharpened
spikes. Its tremendous maw, splitting it almost in half, was opened in roars of pain that showed great yellow fangs
eight inches in length. Its heavy flippers battered the stout roots and lacerated themselves in the beast's insensate
rage. It was quickly dispatched with a flash pistol and Gunga cooked himself some of the meat, using a fire pellet; but despite his hunger Forepaugh did not dare eat any of it, knowing that this species, strange to him, might easily be one of the many on Inra that are poisonous to terrestrials.

They resumed their march toward the distant invisible mountains, and were fortunate in finding somewhat better footing than they had on their previous march. They covered about 25 miles on that "day," without untoward incident. Their ray pistols gave them on insuperable advantage over the largest and most ferocious beasts they could expect to meet, so that they became more and more confident, despite the knowledge that they were rapidly using up the energy stored in their weapons. The first one had long ago been discarded, and the charge indicators of the other two were approaching zero at a disquieting rate. Forepaugh took them both, and from that time on he was careful never to waste a discharge except in case of a direct and unavoidable attack. This often entailed long waits or stealthy detours through sucking mud, and came near to ending both their lives.

The Earth man was in the lead when it happened. Seeking an uncertain footing through a tangle of low-growing, thick, ghastly white vegetation, he placed a foot on what seemed to be a broad, flat rock projecting slightly above the ooze. Instantly there was a violent upheaval of mud; the seeming rock flew up like a trap-door, disclosing a cavernous mouth some seven feet across, and a thick, triangular tentacle flew up from its concealment in the mud in a vicious arc. Forepaugh leaped back barely in time to escape being swept in and engulfed. The end of the tentacle struck him a heavy blow on the chest, throwing him back with such force as to bowl Gunga over, and whirling the pistols out of his hands into a slimy, bulbous growth nearby, where they stuck in the phosphorescent cavities the force of their impact had made.

There was no time to recover the weapons. With a bellow of rage the beast was out of its bed and rushing at them. Nothing stayed its progress. Tough, heavily scaled trees thicker than a man's body shuddered and fell as its bulk brushed by them. But it was momentarily confused, and its first rush carried it past its dodging quarry. This momentary respite saved their lives.

Rearing its plumed head to awesome heights, its knobby bark running with brown rivulets of water, a giant tree, even for that world of giants, offered refuge. The men scrambled up the rough trunk easily, finding plenty of hand and footholds. They came to rest on one of the shelflike circumvoluting rings, some twenty-five feet above the ground. Soon the blunt brown tentacles slithered in search of them, but failed to reach their refuge by inches.

And now began the most terrible siege that interlopers in that primitive world can endure. From that cavernous, distended throat came a tremendous, world-shaking noise.  

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

Forepaugh put his hand to his head. It made him dizzy. He had not believed that such noise could be. He knew that no creature could long live amidst it. He tore strips from his shredded clothing and stuffed his ears, but felt no relief.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

It throbbed in his brain.

Gunga lay a-sprawl, staring with fascinated eye into the pulsating scarlet gullet that was blasting the world with sound. Slowly, slowly he was slipping. His master hauled him back. The Martian grinned at him stupidly, slid again to the edge.

"No you don't!" The Earth man laughed uproariously. The din was making him light-headed. It was so funny! Just in time he had caught that cunning expression and prepared for the outlashing of feet designed to plunge him into the red cavern below and to stop that hellish racket.

"And now--"

He swung his fist heavily, slamming the Martian against the tree. The red eye closed wearily. He was unconscious, and lucky.

Hungrily the Earth man stared at his distant flash pistols, plainly visible in the luminescence of their fungus bedding. He began a slow, cautious creep along the top of a vine some eight inches thick. If he could reach them....

Crash! He was almost knocked to the ground by the thud of a frantic tentacle against the vine. His movement had been seen. Again the tentacle struck with crushing force. The great vine swayed. He managed to reach the shelf again in the very nick of time.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A bolt of lightning struck a giant fern some distance away. The crash of thunder was hardly noticeable.
Forepaugh wondered if his tree would be struck. Perhaps it might even start a fire, giving him a flaming brand with which to torment his tormentor. Vain hope! The wood was saturated with moisture. Even the fire pellets could not make it burn.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

The six-shooter! He had forgotten it. He jerked it from its holster and pointed it at the red throat, emptied all the chambers. He saw the flash of yellow flame, felt the recoil, but the sound of the discharges was drowned in the Brobdignagian tumult. He drew back his arm to throw the useless toy from him. But again that unexplainable, senseless "hunch" restrained him. He reloaded the gun and returned it to its holster.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A thought had been struggling to reach his consciousness against the pressure of the unbearable noise. The fire pellets! Couldn't they be used in some way? These small chemical spheres, no larger than the end of his little finger, had long ago supplanted actual fire along the frontiers, where electricity was not available for cooking. In contact with moisture they emitted terrific heat, a radiant heat which penetrated meat, bone, and even metal. One such pellet would cook a meal in ten minutes, with no sign of scorching or burning. And they had several hundred in one of the standard moisture-proof containers.

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As fast as his fingers could work the trigger of the dispenser Forepaugh dropped the potent little pellets down the bellowing throat. He managed to release about thirty before the bellowing stopped. A veritable tornado of energy broke loose at the foot of the tree. The giant maw was closed, and the shocking silence was broken only by the thrashing of a giant body in its death agonies. The radiant heat, penetrating through and through the beast's body, withered nearby vegetation and could be easily felt on the perch up the tree.

Gunga was slowly recovering. His iron constitution helped him to rally from the powerful blow he had received, and by the time the jungle was still he was sitting up mumbling apologies.

"Never mind," said his master. "Shin down there and cut us off a good helping of roast tongue, if it has a tongue, before something else comes along and beats us out of a feast."

"Him poison, maybe," Gunga demurred. They had killed a specimen new to zoologists.

"Might as well die of poison as starvation," Forepaugh countered.

Without more ado the Martian descended, cut out some large, juicy chunks as his fancy dictated, and brought his loot back up the tree. The meat was delicious and apparently wholesome. They gorged themselves and threw away what they could not eat, for food spoils very quickly in the Inranian jungles and uneaten meat would only serve to attract hordes of the gauzy-winged, glutinous Inranian swamp flies. As they sank into slumber they could hear the beginning of a bedlam of snarling and fighting as the lesser Carnivora fed on the body of the fallen giant.

When they awoke the chronometer recorded the passing of twelve hours, and they had to tear a network of strong fibers with which the tree had invested them preparatory to absorbing their bodies as food. For so keen is the competition for life on Inra that practically all vegetation is capable of absorbing animal food directly. Many an Inranian explorer can tell tales of narrow escapes from some of the more specialized flesh-eating plants; but they are now so well known that they are easily avoided.

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A clean-picked framework of crushed and broken giant bones was all that was left of the late bellowing monster. Six-legged water dogs were polishing them hopefully, or delving into them with their long, sinuous snouts for the marrow. The Earth man fired a few shots with his six-shooter, and they scattered, dragging the bodies of their fallen companions to a safe distance to be eaten.

Only one of the flash pistols was in working order. The other had been trampled by heavy hoofs and was useless. A heavy handicap under which to traverse fifty miles of abysmal jungle. They started with nothing for breakfast except water, of which they had plenty.

Fortunately the outcroppings of rocks and gravel washes were becoming more and more frequent, and they were able to travel at much better speed. As they left the low-lying jungle land they entered a zone which was faintly reminiscent of a terrestrial jungle. It was still hot, soggy, and fetid, but gradually the most primitive aspects of the scene were modified. The over-arching trees were less closely packed, and they came across occasional rock clearings which were bare of vegetation except for a dense carpet of brown, lichenlike vegetation that secreted an astonishing amount of juice. They slipped and sloshed through this, rousing swarms of odd, toothed birds, which darted angrily around their heads and slashed at them with the razor-sharp saw edges on the back of their legs. Annoying as they were, they could be kept away with branches torn from trees, and their presence connoted an absence of the deadly jungle flesh-eaters, permitting a temporary relaxation of vigilance and saving the resources of the last flash gun.

They camped that "night" on the edge of one of these rock clearings. For the first time in weeks it had stopped
raining, although the sun was still obscured. Dimly on the horizon could be seen the first of the foothills. Here they gathered some of the giant, oblong fungus that early explorers had taken for blocks of porous stone because of their size and weight, and, by dint of the plentiful application of fire pellets, managed to set it ablaze. The heat added nothing to their comfort, but it dried them out and allowed them to sleep unmolested.

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An unwary winged eel served as their breakfast, and soon they were on their way to those beckoning hills. It had started to rain again, but the worst part of their journey was over. If they could reach the top of one of the mountains there was a good chance that they would be seen and rescued by their relief ship, provided they did not starve first. The flyer would use the mountains as a base from which to search for the trading station, and it was conceivable that the skipper might actually have anticipated their desperate adventure and would look for them in the Mountains of Perdition.

They had crossed several ranges of the foothills and were beginning to congratulate themselves when the diffused light from above was suddenly blotted out. It was raining again, and above the echo-augmented thunder they heard a shrill screeching.

"A web serpent!" Gunga cried, throwing himself flat on the ground.

Forepaugh eased into a rock cleft at his side. Just in time. A great grotesque head bore down upon him, many-fanged as a medieval dragon. Between obsidian eyes was a fissure whence emanated a wailing and a foul odor. Hundreds of short, clawed legs slithered on the rocks under a long sinuous body. Then it seemed to leap into the air again. Webs grew taut between the legs, strumming as they caught a strong uphill wind. Again it turned to the attack, and missed them. This time Forepaugh was ready for it. He shot at it with his flash pistol.

* * * * *

Nothing happened. The fog made accurate shooting impossible, and the gun lacked its former power. The web serpent continued to course back and forth over their heads.

"Guess we'd better run for it," Forepaugh murmured.

"Go 'head!"

They cautiously left their places of concealment. Instantly the serpent was down again, persistent if inaccurate. It struck the place of their first concealment and missed them.

"Run!"

They extended their weary muscles to the utmost, but it was soon apparent that they could not escape long. A rock wall in their path saved them.

"Hole!" the Martian gasped.

Forepaugh followed him into the rocky cleft. There was a strong draft of dry air, and it would have been next to impossible to hold the Martian back, so Forepaugh allowed him to lead on toward the source of the draft. As long as it led into the mountains he didn't care.

The natural passageway was untenanted. Evidently its coolness and dryness made it untenable for most of Inra's humidity and heat loving life. Yet the floor was so smooth that it must have been artificially leveled. Faint illumination was provided by the rocks themselves. They appeared to be covered by some microscopic phosphorescent vegetation.

After hundreds of twists and turns and interminable straight galleries the cleft turned more sharply upward, and they had a period of stiff climbing. They must have gone several miles and climbed at least 20,000 feet. The air became noticeably thin, which only exhilarated Gunga, but slowed the Earth man down. But at last they came to the end of the cleft. They could go no further, but above them, at least 500 feet higher, they saw a round patch of sky, miraculously bright blue sky!

"A pipe!" Forepaugh cried.

He had often heard of these mysterious, almost fabulous structures sometimes reported by passing travelers. Straight and true, smooth as glass and apparently immune to the elements, they had been occasionally seen standing on the very tops of the highest mountains--seen for a few moments only before they were hidden again by the clouds. Were they observatories of some ancient race, placed thus to pierce the mysteries of outer space? They would find out.

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The inside of the pipe had zigzagging rings of metal, conveniently spaced for easy climbing. With Gunga leading, they soon reached the top. But not quite.

"Eh?" said Forepaugh.

"Uh?" said Gunga.

There had not been a sound, but a distinct, definite command had registered on their minds.

"Stop!"
They tried to climb higher, but could not unclasp their hands. They tried to descend, but could not lower their feet.

The light was by now relatively bright, and as by command their eyes sought the opposite wall. What they saw gave their jaded nerves an unpleasant thrill—a mass of doughy matter of a blue-green color about three feet in diameter, with something that resembled a cyst filled with transparent liquid near its center.

And this thing began to flow along the rods, much as tar flows. From the mass extended a pseudopod; touched Gunga on the arm. Instantly the arm was raw and bleeding. Terrified, immovable, he writhed in agony. The pseudopod returned to the main mass, disappearing into its interior with the strip of bloody skin.

Its attention was centered so much on the luckless Martian that its control slipped from Forepaugh. Seizing his flash pistol, he set the localized for a small area and aimed it at the thing, intent on burning it into nothingness. But again his hand was stayed. Against the utmost of his will-power his fingers opened, letting the pistol drop. The liquid in the cyst danced and bubbled. Was it laughing at him? It had read his mind—thwarted his will again.

Again a pseudopod stretched out and a strip of raw, red flesh adhered to it and was consumed. Mad rage convulsed the Earth man. Should he throw himself tooth and nail on the monster? And be engulfed?

He thought of the six-shooter. It thrilled him.

But wouldn't it make him drop that too?

* * * * *

A flash of atavistic cunning came to him.

He began to reiterate in his mind a certain thought.

"This thing is so I can see you better—this thing is so I can see you better."

He said it over and over, with all the passion and devotion of a celibate's prayer over a uranium fountain.

"This thing is harmless—but it will make me see you better!"

Slowly he drew the six-shooter. In some occult way he knew it was watching him.

"Oh, this is harmless! This is an instrument to aid my weak eyes! It will help me realize your mastery! This will enable me to know your true greatness. This will enable me to know you as a god."

Was it complacence or suspicion that stirred the liquid in the cyst so smoothly? Was it susceptible to flattery? He sighted along the barrel.

"In another moment your great intelligence will overwhelm me," proclaimed his surface mind desperately, while the subconscious tensed the trigger. And at that the clear liquid burst into a turmoil of alarm. Too late.

Forepaugh went limp, but not before he had loosed a steel-jacketed bullet that shattered the mind cyst of the pipe denizen. A horrible pain coursed through his every fibre and nerve. He was safe in the arms of Gunga, being carried to the top of the pipe to the clean dry air, and the blessed, blistering sun.

The pipe denizen was dying. A viscous, inert mass, it dropped lower and lower, lost contact at last, shattered into slime at the bottom.

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Miraculous sun! For a luxurious fifteen minutes they roasted there on the top of the pipe, the only solid thing in a sea of clouds as far as the eye could reach. But no! That was a circular spot against the brilliant white of the clouds, and it was rapidly coming closer. In a few minutes it resolved itself into the Comet, fast relief ship of the Terrestrial, Inranian, Genidian, and Zydian Lines, Inc. With a low buzz of her repulsion motors she drew alongside.

Hooks were attached and ports opened. A petty officer and a crew of roustabouts made her fast.

"What the hell's going on here?" asked the cocky little terrestrial who was skipper, stepping out and surveying the castaways. "We've been looking for you every since your directional wave failed. But come on in—come on in!"

He led the way to his stateroom, while the ship's surgeon took Gunga in charge. Closing the door carefully, he delved into the bottom of his locker and brought out a flask.

"Can't be too careful," he remarked, filling a small tumbler for himself and another for his guest. "Always apt to be some snooper to report me. But say—you're wanted in the radio room."

"Radio room nothing! When do we eat?"

"Right away, but you'd better see him. Fellow from the Interplanetary News Agency wants you to broadcast a copyrighted story. Good for about three years' salary, old boy."

"All right. I'll see him"—with a happy sigh—"just as soon as I put through a personal message."
By ALBERT R. TEICHNER

The machine had stood there a long time. It was several hundred feet long and could run on a thimbleful of earth or water. Complete in itself, the machine drew material from the surrounding landscape, transmuting matter to its special purposes. It needed sugar, salt, water and many other things but never failed to have them. It was still working. And at the delivery end, where the packaging devices had been broken down, it turned out a steady turgid stream on the ground of pink-striped, twisting taffy.

Once the whole vast desert area had been filled with such devices, producing all the varied needs of a very needful human race. But there had been no machine to produce peace. The crossing shock waves of fused hydrogen had destroyed the machines by the tens of thousands, along with all the automatic shipping lines, leaving only, in the quirk of a pressure cross-pattern, an undisturbed taffy-making machine, oozing its special lava on the plateau floor.

It had been working seven and a half million years.

It continued to repair itself, as if a child of the race that had started all this would come by it at any moment to tip an eager pinky in the still-warm taffy to taste its tangy sweetness. But there were no human beings. There had been none since the day when the packager collapsed, at the edge of the total-evaporation zone.

*Creno set a few of his legs on the edge of the glassy, weathered ridge and gazed over the plateau. Harta, next to him, trembled as she adjusted to the strange hardness of these four dimensions. "Being is a thin thing here," she said.

"Thin, yes," Creno smiled. "An almost dead world. But there is a mystery in that almost to make the journey worth the coming."

"What mystery?" But Creno was of the wisest on the home planet and her sense feelers scanned once more to find what he must mean. "I do feel it! Everything dead but that one great mental thing moving, and a four-dimensional stream coming out in the vibrations of this world!"

"I have been watching it," said Creno. "What kind of life can that be? You are a sharp sensor, Harta. Focus to it."

She strained and then relaxed, speaking: "The circuits are closed into themselves. It learns nothing from outside itself except to move and extend its metal feelers for food. Soil is its food. Soil is its energy. Soil is its being."

"Can it be alive?"

"It is alive."

All his legs rested now in a row along the ridge. He too was relaxed as one mystery disappeared. "I feel your feelings, but the thing is not alive. It is a machine."

"I do not understand. A machine in the middle of a dead world?"

"Whether we understand why or not, that is what it is—a machine."

Harta throbbed with excitement. How could Creno be wrong? He knew everything as soon as the facts were in his mind. Yet here now were living things crawling toward the machine, just like the excrescence at one end but in no way a part of it! The feeling of willed effort as they crawled slowly toward it, white and pink striped, reaching grasping feelers into the turgid product, taking it in, then rising on easing legs as the food spread within them.

"There are living creatures here!" Creno pondered. "I feel your messages. Twenty, thirty—a horde is crawling from that mountain toward it."

"Four thousand three hundred and ninety-one," said Harta. She concentrated. "There are three thousand and five more in the mountain caves, waiting to come out as the others return."

They came in groups of about a hundred, pulling themselves slowly toward the edges of the great sticky lake that lay within the vaster area where the pink matter dried and crumbled into the strong breeze. Some were smaller than others, offspring who were nudged along by their elders. But these small creatures were the ones who scampered most of all after they had fed. Joyously they danced back toward the mountain. A few of medium height went back in pairs, firm taffy fingers intertwined in each other.

"They mate," said Creno. "It is their custom."

"How tiring they are," said Harta. "I have lost interest. We have seen thirty-one worlds with such customs and these creatures are too simple to be interesting. Let us go home or try some other system."

"Not yet," Creno insisted. "We passed through the ocean and surveyed the lands of this tiny planet. Nowhere else has there been the tiniest unit of life. Why at this one spot should something exist?"

"But we have several parallel situations," Harta protested. "They were colonies landed in one spot by the civilization of another planet. They landed here with their feeder machine. And that is the explanation."

"Your mind does not function well in a four-dimension continuum, Harta. You will need more training—"

"But these cases are rare, and, Creno—"
"I know they are rare, my child. But still they exist. You will have to learn eventually, a little at a time. Now then, it is a rule of such limited dimensional realms that the movement of matter and events from place to place is highly difficult. Certain compacting procedures must be observed. To transport a machine this size across their space would have required enormous effort and an intelligence they do not yet have. More than that, it would have been unnecessary. A smaller device would have supplied them with food. I am forced to conclude that--somehow--we are approaching this problem backwards."

"Backwards? You mean they made the machine here after they came?"

He did not reply to that. "We must concentrate together on thinking ourselves into their functioning in their manifold."

Harta followed his suggestion, and soon their thoughts were moving among and within the striped creatures. The insides of their bodies consisted of fundamentally the same taffy substance; but it had been modified by various organic structures. All, though, were built of the same fundamental units: elongated, thin cells which readily aligned themselves in semi-crystalline patterns.

"Enough," Creno said, "back to the hill."

Their rows of thin limbs rested on the ridge crest once more. "We have seen such cell crystals before," she sighed. "The inefficiencies in such a poverty of dimensions! Do you still think we have looked at it backwards?"

"Of course we have. They did not bring the machine or make it--the machine made them!"

"That is not possible, Creno, great as you are in these matters. We have never seen life created by a machine before. No one ever has, from the millions of reports I have seen at home."

"Maybe we have and not known it. The life we have seen always evolved through enormous eons and we could not see its origins clearly in most cases. Here we are dealing with something that has taken comparatively little time." He stopped, shocked that he, an elder, had said so much. "No, disregard such theories. You are still too young to bother with them. Here is the important thing--this machine was left by an earlier race that disappeared. Everything else was destroyed but it went right on producing its substance."

"The substance is not life."

"It is only four-dimensional matter, right. But over a long enough time--you know this as well as I do--random factors will eventually produce a life form. By some trick of radiation this process has been speeded up here. The substance the machine produces has in turn produced life!"

Creno sensed with a tremor some dangerous shifting in Harta's consciousness. As an elder it was his duty to prevent a premature insight in the young. It had been a mistake to bring this up. He must go no further. It was not necessary. Harta took it up for him.

"Then any substance producing life and modified by it could--if you go far enough back--be the product of a machine. But it would have taken so long to produce life that the original matter, that bore the direct imprint of the machine, would have disappeared."

"An error," said Creno desperately. "There is just this case."

"By the time these creatures have arrived at self-knowledge the machine will be gone. They will not know it ever existed, and--"

"That is all it means. There is just this one case. Now we must leave this unimportant example of minor dimensions!"

He strained consciousness to a forward movement but Harta remained behind. He had to pull back. "Start," he ordered.

Her mind's obstinately frozen stance made him freeze too. He applied all his force to bring her back into control, but she still held fast.

"Something more is hidden from me. I will be back," she said. And she disappeared from the ridge.

He had never faced such a quandary before on a training trip with a younger one. If he went in pursuit he would find her ultimately--that was in the nature of being older and wiser--but, if she revolted against his pursuit, she could extend the time considerably on this forsaken planet. And he wanted to get her away as soon as possible.

The more time here the more chance that the awful truth would come to her before her time.

He watched the growing waves of creatures floundering toward the vast oozing puddle, which refilled itself as quickly as it was diminished by them, and the receding waves of those that had already fed. This, he could see, was an endless process. The whole life of the species moved in continuous systole-diastole around the machine.

Soon he would have to go in search of her.

But then she was back at his side, her being for this world once more solidified. She concentrated for a moment on the pink-striped waves of rippling inward and outward around the great sustaining pool, then communicated with him.
"We can leave now. There is nothing more to see."

Something in her mind remained closed to his, as the mind of younger never should be to older. But at least he could see with relief that the worst had not happened. The deeper knowledge had not arrived to her too early when it could only hurt. All he found turned to him—as they receded from this thin-manifold universe, then moved up the dimension ladder to their home level—was a surface of happiness.

Suddenly, though, as they prepared for flight in that hyperspace all her joy was gone.

"I saw it," she said. "In my free and unrestricted spirit I moved deep into the substance of that world, below all the total ruin, far below. And there was a monstrous machine, near the molten core, almost infinitely older than the feeding one far above it. And it, too, had been left in a stratum where all else was destroyed. I could see it had once produced the ooze from which came the life from which in turn come the beings by whom the machine above it was made. Maybe they, too, thought they were free and unrestricted!"

He sighed for the bitter cost of knowledge.

This one would no longer go forth in the joy of mere exploration, and he would no longer live vicariously in the happiness of another being's innocence. Now Harta, too, would be seeking the answer to the question of original creation, the answer that he had not found in his journeys across a myriad worlds and dimensions....

That no one had ever found.

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HOMESICK
By LYN VENABLE

What thrill is there in going out among the stars if coming back means bitter loneliness?

Frankston pushed listlessly at a red checker with his right forefinger. He knew the move would cost him a man, but he lacked enough interest in the game to plot out a safe move. His opponent, James, jumped the red disk with a black king and removed it from the board. Gregory, across the room, flicked rapidly through the pages of a magazine, too rapidly to be reading anything, or even looking at the pictures. Ross lay quietly on his bunk, staring out of the viewport.

The four were strangely alike in appearance, nearly the same age, the age where gray hairs finally outnumber black, or baldness takes over. The age when the expanding waistline has begun to sag tiredly, when robust middle age begins the slow accelerating decline toward senility.

A strange group to find aboard a spaceship, but then The Columbus was a very strange ship. Bolted to its outer hull, just under the viewports, were wooden boxes full of red geraniums, and ivy wound tenuous green fronds over the gleaming hull that had withstood the bombardment of pinpoint meteors and turned away the deadly power of naked cosmic rays.

Frankston glanced at his wristchrono. It was one minute to six.

"In about a minute," he thought, "Ross will say something about going out to water his geraniums." The wristchrono ticked fifty-nine times.

"I think I'll go out and water my geraniums," said Ross.

No one glanced up. Then Gregory threw his magazine on the floor. Ross got up and walked, limping slightly, to a wall locker. He pulled out the heavy, ungainly spacesuit and the big metal bulb of a headpiece. He carried them to his bunk and laid them carefully down.

"Will somebody please help me on with my suit?" he asked.

For one more long moment, no one moved. Then James got up and began to help Ross fit his legs into the suit. Ross had arthritis, not badly, but enough so that he needed a little help climbing into a spacesuit.

James pulled the heavy folds of the suit up around Ross's body and held it while Ross extended his arms into the sleeve sections. His hands, in the heavy gauntlets, were too unwieldy to do the front fastenings, and he stood silently while James did it for him.

Ross lifted the helmet, staring at it as a cripple might regard a wheelchair which he loathed but was wholly dependent upon. Then he fitted the helmet over his head and James fastened it down and lifted the oxygen tank to his back.

"Ready?" asked James.
The bulbous headpiece inclined in a nod. James walked to a panel and threw a switch marked INNER LOCK. A round aperture slid silently open. Ross stepped through it and the door shut behind him as James threw the switch back to its original position. Opposite the switch marked OUTER LOCK a signal glowed redly and James threw another switch. A moment later the signal flickered out.

Frankston, with a violent gesture, swept the checker board clean. Red and black men clattered to the floor, rolling and spinning. Nobody picked them up.

"What does he do it for?" demanded Frankston in a tight voice. "What does he get out of those stinking geraniums he can't touch or smell?"

"Shut up," said Gregory.

James looked up sharply. Curtness was unusual for Gregory, a bad sign. Frankston was the one he'd been watching, the one who'd shown signs of cracking, but after so long, even a psycho-expert's opinion might be haywire. Who was a yardstick? Who was normal?

"Geraniums don't smell much anyway," added Gregory in a more conciliatory tone.

"Yeah," agreed Frankston, "I'd forgotten that. But why does he torture himself like this, and us, too?"

"Because that's what he wanted to do," answered James.

"Sure," agreed Gregory, "the whole trip--the last twenty years of it, anyhow--all he could talk about was how, when he got back to Earth, he was going to buy a little place in the country and raise flowers."

"Well, we're back," muttered Frankston, with a terrible bitterness. "He's raising flowers, but not in any little place in the country."

Gregory continued almost dreamily, "Remember the last night out? We were all gathered around the viewscreen. And there was Earth, getting bigger and greener and closer all the time. Remember what it felt like to be going back, after thirty years?"

"Thirty years cooped up in this ship," grumbled Frankston. "All our twenties and thirties and forties ..."

"But we were coming home." There was a rapt expression on Gregory's lined and weathered face. "We were looking forward to the twenty or maybe thirty good years we had left, talking about what we'd do, where we'd live, wondering what had changed on Earth. At least we had that last night out. All the data was stashed away in the microfiles, all the data about planets with air we couldn't breathe and food we couldn't eat. We were going home, home to big, friendly, green Earth."

Frankston's face suddenly crumpled as though he were about to weep and he cradled his head against his arms. "God, do we have to go over it all again? Not again tonight!"

"Leave him alone," ordered James with an inflection of command in his voice. "Go to the other section of the ship if you don't want to listen. He has to keep going over it, just like Ross has to keep watering his geraniums."

Frankston remained motionless and Gregory looked gratefully at James. James was the steady one. It was easier for him because he understood.

Gregory's face became more and more animated as he lost himself, living again his recollections: "The day we blasted in. The crowds. Thousands of people, all there to see us come in. We were proud. Of course, we thought we were the first to land, just like we'd been the first to go out. Those cheers, coming from thousands of people at once. For us. Ross-- Lt. Ross--was the first one out of the lock. We'd decided on that; he'd been in command for almost ten years, ever since Commander Stevens died. You remember Stevens, don't you? He took over when we lost Captain Willers. Well, anyway, Ross out first, and then you, James, and you, Frankston, and then Trippitt, and me last, because you were all specialists and I was just a crewman. The crewman, I should say, the only one left.

"Ross hesitated and almost stumbled when he stepped out, and tears began pouring from his eyes, but I thought--well, you know, coming home after thirty years and all that. But when I stepped out of the lock, my eyes stung like fire and a thousand needles seemed to jab at my skin.

"And then the President himself stepped forward with the flowers. That's where the real trouble began, with the flowers. I remember Ross stretching out his arms to take the bouquet, like a mother reaching for a baby. Then suddenly he dropped them, sneezing and coughing and sobbing for breath, and the President reached out to help him, asking him over and over what was wrong.

"It was the same with all of us, and we turned and staggered back to the ship, closing the lock behind us. It was bad then. God, I'll never forget it! The five of us, moaning in agony, gasping for breath, our eyes all swollen shut, and the itching ... that itching." Gregory shuddered.

Even the emotionally disciplined James set his teeth and felt his scalp crawl at the memory of that horror. He glanced toward the viewport, as though to cleanse his mind of the memory. He could see Ross out there, among the geraniums, moving slowly and painfully in his heavy spacesuit. Occupational therapy. Ross watered flowers and
Gregory talked and Frankston was bitter and ... himself? Observation, maybe.

Gregory's voice began again, "And then they were pounding on the lock, begging us to let the doctor in, but we were all rolling and thrashing with the itching, burning, sneezing, and finally James got himself under control enough to open the locks and let them in.

"Then came the tests, allergy tests. Remember those? They'd cut a little row of scratches in your arm ..." Each man instinctively glanced at his forearm, saw neat rows of tiny pink scars, row on row. "Then they'd put a little powder in each cut and each kind of powder was an extract of some common substance we might be allergic to. The charts they made were full of 'P's, P for positive, long columns of big, red 'P's. All pollen, dust, wool, nylon, cotton, fish, meat, fruit, vegetables, grain, milk, whisky, cigarettes, dogs, cats--everything! And wasn't it funny about us being allergic to women's face powder? Ha! We were allergic to women from their nylon hose to their face powder.

"Thirty years of breathing purified, sterilized, filtered air, thirty years of drinking distilled water and swallowing synthetic food tablets had changed us. The only things we weren't allergic to were the metal and plastic and synthetics of our ship, this ship. We're allergic to Earth. That's funny, isn't it?"

Gregory began to rock back and forth, laughing the thin high laugh of hysteria. James silently walked to a water hydrant and filled a plastic cup. He brought Gregory a small white pill.

"You wouldn't take this with the rest of us at supper. You'd better take it now. You need it."
Gregory nodded bleakly, sobering at once, and swallowed the pellet. He made a face after the water.
"Distilled," he spat. "Distilled ... no flavor ... no life ... like us ... distilled."

"If only we could have blasted off again." Frankston's voice came muffled through his hands. "It wouldn't have made any difference where. Anywhere or nowhere. No, our fine ship is obsolete and we're old, much too old. They have the spacedrive now. Men don't make thirty-year junkets into space and come back allergic to Earth. They go out, and in a month or two they're back, with their hair still black and their eyes still bright and their uniforms still fit. A month or two is all. Those crowds that cheered us, they were proud of us and sorry for us, because we'd been out thirty years and they never expected us back at all. But it was inconvenient for Spaceport." Bitter sarcasm tinged his voice. "They actually had to postpone the regular monthly Trans-Galactic run to let us in with this big, clumsy hulk."

"Why didn't we ever see any of the new ships either going out or coming back?" asked Gregory.

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Frankston shook his head. "You don't see a ship when it's in spacedrive. It's out of normal space-time dimensions. We had a smattering of the theory at cadet school ... anyway, if one did flash into normal space-time--say, for instance, coming in for a landing--the probability of us being at the same place at the same time was almost nil. 'Two ships passing in the night' as the old saying goes."

Gregory nodded, "I guess Trippitt was the lucky one."

"You didn't see Trippitt die," replied James.

"What was it?" asked Frankston. "What killed Trippitt? So quickly, too. He was only outside a few minutes like the rest of us, and eight hours later he was dead."

"We couldn't be sure," answered James. "Some virus. There are countless varieties. People live in a contaminated atmosphere all their lives, build up a resistance to them. Sometimes a particularly virulent strain will produce an epidemic, but most people, if they're affected, will have a mild case of whatever it is and recover. But after thirty years in space, thirty years of breathing perfectly pure, uncontaminated air, Trippitt had no antibodies in his bloodstream. The virus hit and he died."

"But why didn't the rest of us get it?" asked Gregory.

"We were lucky. Viruses are like that."

"Those people talked about building a home for us," muttered Frankston. "Why didn't they?"

"It wouldn't have been any different," answered James gently. "It would have been the same, almost an exact duplicate of the ship, everything but the rockets. Same metal and plastic and filtered air and synthetic food. It couldn't have had wool rugs or down pillows or smiling wives or fresh air or eggs for breakfast. It would have been just like this. So, since the ship was obsolete, they gave it to us, and a plot of ground to anchor it to, and we're home. They did the best they could for us, the very best they could."

"But I feel stifled, shut in!"

"The ship is large, Frankston. We all crowd into this section because, without each other, we'd go mad." James kicked the edge of the magazine on the floor. "Thank God we're not allergic to decontaminated paper. There's still reading."

"We're getting old," said Gregory. "Some day one of us will be here alone."

"God help him then," answered James, with more emotion than was usual for him.

* * * * *
During the latter part of the conversation, the little red signal had been flashing persistently. Finally James saw it. Ross was in the outer lock. James threw the decontaminator switch and the signal winked out. Every trace of dust and pollen would have to be removed from Ross's suit before he could come inside the ship.

"Just like on an alien planet," commented Gregory.

"Isn't that what this is to us--an alien planet?" asked Frankston, and neither of the other men dared answer his bitter question.

A few minutes later, Ross was back in the cabin, and James helped him out of his spacesuit.

"How are the geraniums, Ross?" asked Gregory.

"Fine," said Ross enthusiastically. "They're doing just fine."

He walked over to his bunk and lay down on his side so he could see out of the viewport. There would be an hour left before darkness fell, an hour to watch the geraniums. They were tall and red, and swayed slightly in the evening breeze.

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**Contents**

THE METEOR GIRL
By Jack Williamson

Through the complicated space-time of the fourth dimension goes Charlie King in an attempt to rescue the Meteor Girl.

"What's the good in Einstein, anyhow?"

I shot the question at lean young Charlie King. In a moment he looked up at me; I thought there was pain in the back of his clear brown eyes. Lips closed in a thin white line across his wind-tanned face; nervously he tapped his pipe on the metal cowling of the Golden Gull's cockpit.

"I know that space is curved, that there is really no space or time, but only space-time, that electricity and gravitation and magnetism are all the same. But how is that going to pay my grocery bill--or yours?"

"That's what Virginia wants to know."

"Virginia Randall!" I was astonished. "Why, I thought--"

"I know. We've been engaged a year. But she's called it off."

Charlie looked into my eyes for a long minute, his lips still compressed. We were leaning on the freshly painted, streamline fuselage of the Golden Gull, as neat a little amphibian monoplane as ever made three hundred miles an hour. She stood on the glistening white sand of our private landing field on the eastern Florida coast. Below us the green Atlantic was running in white foam on the rocks.

In the year that Charlie King and I had been out of the Institute of Technology, we had built the nucleus of a commercial airplane business. We had designed and built here in our own shops several very successful seaplanes and amphibians. Charlie's brilliant mathematical mind was of the greatest aid, except when he was too far lost in his abstruse speculations to descend to things commercial. Mathematics is painful enough to me when it is used in calculating the camber of an airplane wing. And pure mathematics, such as the theories of relativity and equivalence, I simply abhor.

I was amazed. Virginia Randall was a girl trim and beautiful as our shining Golden Gull. I had thought them devotedly in love, and had been looking forward to the wedding.

"But it isn't two weeks, since Virginia was out here! You took her up in our Western Gull IV!"

Nervously Charlie lit his pipe, drew quickly on it. His face, lean and drawn beneath the flying goggles pushed up on his forehead, sought mine anxiously.

"I know. I drove her back to the station. That was when--when we quarreled."


"She wanted me to give it up here, and go in with her father in his Wall Street brokerage business. The old gent is willing to take me, and make a business man of me."

"Why, I couldn't run the business without you, Charlie!"

"We talked about that, Hammond. I don't really do much of the work. Just play around with the mathematics, and leave the models and blueprints to you."

"Oh, Charlie, that's not quite--"
"It's the truth, right enough," he said, bitterly. "You design aircraft, and I play with Einstein. And as you say, a fellow can't eat equations."

"I'd hate to see you go."

"And I'd hate to give up you, and our business, and the math. Really no need of it. My tastes are simple enough. And old 'Iron-clad' Randall has made all one family needs. Virginia's not exactly a pauper, herself. Two or three millions, I think."

"And where did Virginia go?"

"She took the Valhalla yesterday at San Francisco. Going to join her father at Panama. He cruises about the world in his steam yacht, you know, and runs Wall Street by radio. I was to telegraph her if I'd changed my mind. I decided to stick to you, Hammond. I telegraphed a corsage of orchids, and sent her the message, 'Einstein forever!'"

"If I know Virginia, those were not very politic words."

"Well, a man--"

* * * * *

His words were cut short by a very unusual incident.

A thin, high scream came suddenly from above our neat stuccoed hangars at the edge of the white field. I looked up quickly, to catch a glimpse of a bright object hurtling through the air above our heads. The bellowing scream ended abruptly in a thunderous crash. I felt a tremor of the ground underfoot.

"What--" I ejaculated.

"Look!" cried Charlie.

He pointed. I looked over the gleaming metal wing of the Golden Gull, to see a huge cloud of white sand rising like a fountain at the farther side of the level field. Deliberately the column of debris rose, spread, rained down, leaving a gaping crater in the earth.

"Something fell?"

"It sounded like a shell from a big gun, except that it didn't explode. Let's get over and see!"

We ran to where the thing had struck, three hundred yards across the field. We found a great funnel-shaped pit torn in the naked earth. It was a dozen yards across, fifteen feet deep, and surrounded with a powdery ring of white sand and pulverized rock.

"Something like a shell-hole," I observed.

"I've got it!" Charlie cried. "It was a meteor!"

"A meteor? So big?"

"Yes. Lucky for us it was no bigger. If it had been like the one that fell in Siberia a few years ago, or the one that made the Winslow crater in Arizona--we wouldn't have been talking about it. Probably we have a chunk of nickel-iron alloy here."

"I'll get some of the men out here with digging tools, and we'll see what we can find."

Our mechanics were already hurrying across the field. I shouted at them to bring picks and shovels. In a few minutes five of us were at work throwing sand and shattered rock out of the pit.

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Suddenly I noticed a curious thing. A pale bluish mist hung in the bottom of the pit. It was easily transparent, no denser than tobacco smoke. Passing my spade through it did not seem to disturb it in the least.

I rubbed my eyes doubtfully, said to Charlie, "Do you see a sort of blue haze in the pit?"

He peered. "No. No.... Yes. Yes, I do! Funny thing. Kind of a blue fog. And the tools cut right through it without moving it! Queer! Must have something to do with the meteor!" He was very excited.

We dug more eagerly. An hour later we had opened the hole to a depth of twenty feet. Our shovels were clanging on the gray iron of the rock from space. The mist had grown thicker as the excavation deepened; we looked at the stone through a screen of motionless blue fog.

We had found the meteor. There were several queer things about it. The first man who touched it--a big Swede mechanic named Olson--was knocked cold as if by a nasty jolt of electricity. It took half an hour to bring him to consciousness.

As fast as the rugged iron side of the meteorite was uncovered, a white crust of frost formed over it.

"It was as cold as outer space, nearly at the absolute zero," Charlie explained. "And it was heated only superficially during its quick passage through the air. But how it comes to be charged with electricity--I can't say."

He hurried up to his laboratory behind the hangars, where he had equipment ranging from an astronomical telescope to a delicate seismograph. He brought back as much electrical equipment as he could carry. He had me touch an insulated wire to the frost-covered stone from space, while he put the other end to one post of a galvanometer.

I think he got a current that wrecked the instrument. At any rate, he grew very much excited.
"Something queer about that stone!" he cried. "This is the chance of a lifetime! I don't know that a meteor has ever been scientifically examined so soon after falling."

* * * * *

He hurried us all across to the laboratory. We came back with a truck load of coils and tubes and batteries and potentiometers and other assorted equipment. He had men with heavy robber gloves lift the frost-covered stone to a packing box on a bench. The thing was irregular in shape, about a foot long; it must have weighed two hundred pounds. He sent a man racing on a motorcycle to the drug store to get dry ice (solidified carbon dioxide) to keep the iron stone at its low temperature.

In a few hours he had a complete laboratory set up around the meteorite. He worked feverishly in the hot sunshine, reading the various instruments he had set up, and arranging more. He contrived to keep the stone cold by packing it in a box of dry ice.

The mechanics stopped for dinner, and I tried to get him to take time to eat.

"No, Hammond," he said. "This is something big! We were talking about Einstein. This rock seems energized with a new kind of force: all meteors are probably the same way, when they first plunge out of space. I think this will be to relativity what the falling apple is to gravity. This is a big thing."

He looked up at me, brown eyes flashing.

"This is my chance to make a name, Hammond. If I do something big enough--Virginia might reconsider her opinion."

Charlie worked steadily through the long hot afternoon. I spent most of the time helping him, or gazing in fascination at the curious haze of luminous blue mist that clung like a sphere of azure fog about the meteoric stone. I did not completely understand what he did; the reader who wants the details may consult the monograph he is preparing for the scientific press.

He had the men string up a line from our direct current generator in the shops, to supply power for his electrical instruments. He mounted a powerful electromagnet just below the meteorite, and set up an X-ray tube to bombard it with rays.

* * * * *

Night came, and the fire of the white sun faded from the sky. In the darkness, the curious haze about the stone became luminescent, distinct, a dim, motionless sphere of blue light. I fancied that I saw grotesque shapes flashing through it. A ball of blue fire, shimmering and ghost-like, shrouded the instruments.

Charlie's induction coil buzzed wickedly, with purple fire playing about the terminals. The X-ray tube flickered with a greenish glow. He manipulated the rheostat that controlled the current through the electromagnet, and continued to read his instruments.

"Look at that!" he cried.

The bluish haze about the stone grew brighter; it became a ball of sapphire flame, five feet thick, bright and motionless. A great sphere of shimmering azure fire! Wisps of pale, sparkling bluish mist ringed it. The stone in its box, the X-ray bulb and other apparatus were hidden. The end of the table stuck oddly from the ball of light.

I heard Charlie move a switch. The hum of the coils changed a note.

The ball of blue fire vanished abruptly. It became a hole, a window in space!

Through it, we saw another world!

The darkness of the night hung about us. Where the ball had been was a circle of misty blue flame, five feet across. Through that circle I could see a vast expanse of blue ocean, running in high, white-capped rollers, beneath a sky overcast with low gray clouds.

It was no flat picture like a movie screen. The scene had vast depth; I knew that we were really looking over an infinite expanse of stormy ocean. It was all perfectly clear, distinct, real!

* * * * *

Astounded, I turned to find Charlie standing back and looking into the ring of blue fire, with a curious mixture of surprise and delighted satisfaction.

"What--what--" I gasped.

"It's amazing! Wonderful! More than I had dared hope for! The complete vindication of my theory! If Virginia cares for scientific reputation--"

"But what is it?"

"It's hard to explain without mathematical language. You might say that we are looking through a hole in space. The new force in the meteorite, amplified by the X-rays and the magnetic field, is causing a distortion of space-time coordinates. You know that a gravitational field bends light; the light of a star is deflected in passing the sun. The field of this meteorite bends light through space-time, through the four-dimensional continuum. That scrap of ocean we can see may be on the other side of the earth."
I walked around the circle of luminous smoke with the marvelous picture in the center. It seemed that the window swung with me. I surveyed the whole angry surface of that slate-gray, storm-beaten sea, to the misty horizon. Nowhere was it broken by land or ship.

Charlie fell to adjusting his rheostat and switches.

It seemed that the gray ocean moved swiftly beyond the window. Vast stretches of it raced below our eyes. Faint black stains of steamer smoke appeared against the blue-gray horizon and swept past. Then land appeared—a long, green-gray line. We had a flash of a long coast that unreeled in endless panorama before us. It was such a view as one might get from a swift airplane—a plane flying thousands of miles per hour.

The Golden Gate flashed before us, with the familiar skyline of San Francisco rising on the hills behind it.

"San Francisco!" Charlie cried. "This is the Pacific we've been seeing. Let's find the Valhalla. We might be able to see Virginia!"

* * * * *

The coast-line vanished as he manipulated his instruments. Staring into the circle of shining blue mist, I saw the endless ocean racing below us again. We picked up a pleasure yacht, running under bare poles.

"I didn't know there was such a storm on," Charlie murmured.

Other vessels swam past below us, laboring against heavy seas.

Then we looked upon an ocean whipped into mighty white-crowned waves. Rain beat down in sheets from low dense clouds; vivid violet lightnings flashed before us. It seemed very strange to see such lightning and hear not the faintest whisper of thunder—but no sound came from anything we saw through the blue-rimmed window in space.

"I hope the Valhalla isn't in weather like this!" cried Charlie.

In a few minutes a dark form loomed through the wind-riven mist. Swiftly it swam nearer; became a black ship.

"Only a tramp," Charlie said, breathing a sigh of relief.

It was a dingy tramp steamer, her superstructure wrecked. Her fires seemed dead. She lay across the wind, rolling sluggishly, threatening to sink with every monstrous wave. We saw no living person aboard her; she seemed a sinking derelict. We made out the name Roma on her side.

Charlie moved his dials again.

In a few minutes the slender prow of another great steamer came through the sheets of rain. It was evidently a passenger vessel. She seemed limping along, half wrecked, with mighty waves breaking over her rail.

Charlie grew white with alarm. "The Valhalla!" he gasped. "And she's headed straight for that wreck!"

In a moment, as he brought the liner closer below our blue-rimmed window, I, too, made out the name. The wet, glistening decks were almost deserted. Here and there a man struggled futilely against the force of the storm.

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In a few minutes the drifting wreck of the Roma came into our view, dead ahead of the limping liner. Through the mist and falling rain, the derelict could not have been in sight of the lookout of the passenger vessel until she was almost upon it.

We saw the white burst of steam as the siren was blown. We watched the desperate effort of the liner to check her way, to come about. But it was too much for the already crippled ship. Charlie cried out as a mighty wave drove the Valhalla down upon the sluggishly drifting wreck.

All the mad scene that ensued was strangely silent. We heard no crash when the collision occurred; heard no screams or shouts while the mob of desperate, white-faced passengers were fighting their way to the deck. The vain struggle to launch the boats was like a silent movie.

One boat was splintered while being lowered. Another, already filled with passengers, was lifted by a great wave and crushed against the side of the ship. Only shivered wood and red foam were left. The ship listed so rapidly that the boats on the lee side were useless. It was impossible to launch the others in that terrible, lashing sea.

"Virginia can swim." Charlie said hopefully. "You know she tried the Channel last year, and nearly made it, too."

He stopped to watch that terrible scene in white-faced, anxious silence.

The tramp went down before the steamer, drawing fragments of wrecked boats after it. The liner was evidently sinking rapidly. We saw dozens of hopeless, panic-stricken passengers diving off the lee side, trying to swim off far enough to avoid the tremendous suction.

Then, with a curious deliberation, the bow of the Valhalla dipped under green water; her stern rose in the air until the ship stood almost perpendicular. She slipped quickly down, out of sight.

Only a few swimming humans, and the wrecks of a few boats, were left on the rough gray sea. Charlie fumbled nervously with his dials, trying to get the scene near enough so that we could see the identity of the struggling swimmers.

* * * * *
A long boat, which must have been swept below by the suction of the ship, came plunging above the surface, upside down. It drifted swiftly among the swimmers, who struggled to reach it. I saw one person, evidently a girl, grasp it and drag herself upon it. It swept past the few others still struggling.

The wrecked boat with the girl upon it seemed coming swiftly toward our blue-rimmed window. In a few minutes I saw something familiar about her.

"It's Virginia!" Charlie cried. "God! We've got to save her, somehow!"

The long rollers drove the over-turned boat swiftly along. Virginia Randall clung desperately to it, deluged in foam, whipped with flying spray, the wild wind tearing at her.

About us, the clear still night was deepening. The air was warm and still; the hot stars shone steadily. Quiet lighted houses were in sight above the beach. It was very strange to look through the fire-rimmed circle, to see a girl struggling for life, clinging to a wrecked boat in a stormy sea.

Charlie watched in an apathy of grief and horror, trembling and speechless doing nothing except move the controls to keep the floating girl in our sight.

* * * * *

Hours went by as we watched. Then Charlie cried out in sudden hope. "There's a chance! I might do it! I might be able to save her!"

"Might do what?"

"We are able to see what we do because the field of the meteor bends light through the four-dimensional continuum. The world line of a ray of light is a geodesic in the continuum. The field I have built distorts the continuum, so we see rays that originated at a distant point. Is that clear?"

"Clear as mud!"

"Well, anyhow, if the field were strong enough, we could bring physical objects through space-time, instead of mere visual images. We could pick Virginia up and bring her right here to the crater! I'm sure of it!"

"You mean you could move a girl through some four or five thousand miles of space!"

"You don't understand. She wouldn't come through space at all, but through space-time, through the continuum, which is a very different thing. She is four thousand miles away in our three-dimensional space, but in space-time, as you see, she is only a few yards away. She is only a few yards from us in the fourth dimension. If I can increase the field a little, she will be drawn right through!"

"You're a wizard if you can do it!"

"I've got to do it! She's a fine swimmer--that's the only reason she's still alive--but she'll never live to reach the shore. Not in a sea like that!"

Charlie fell to work at once, mounting another electromagnet beside the one he had set up, and rigging up two more X-ray bulbs beside the packing box which held the meteor. The motion of the boat in the fire-rimmed window kept drawing it swiftly away from us, and Charlie showed me how to move the dial of his rheostat to keep the girl in view.

* * * * *

Before he had completed his arrangements, a patch of white foam came into view just ahead of the drifting boat. In a moment I made out a cruel black rock, with the angry sea breaking into fleecy spray upon it. The boat was almost upon it, driving straight for it. Charlie saw it, and cried out in horror.

The long black hull of the splintered boat, floating keel upward, was only a few yards away. A great white-capped breaker lifted it and hurled it forward, with the girl clinging to it. She drew herself up and stared in terror at the black rock, while another long surging roller picked up the boat and swept it forward again.

I stood, paralyzed in horror, while the shattered boat was driven full upon the great rock. I could imagine the crash of it, but it was all as still as a silent picture. The boat, riding high on a crest of white foam, smashed against the rock, while another long surging roller picked up the boat and swept it forward again.

I stood, paralyzed in horror, while the shattered boat was driven full upon the great rock. I could imagine the crash of it, but it was all as still as a silent picture. The boat, riding high on a crest of white foam, smashed against the rock, and was shattered to splinters. Virginia was hurled forward against the slick wet stone. Desperately she scrambled to reach the top of the boulder. Her hands slipped on the polished rock; the wild sea dragged at her. At last she got out of reach of the angry gray water, though spume still deluged her.

I breathed a sigh of relief, though her position was still far from enviable.

"Virginia! Virginia! Why did I let you go?" Charlie cried.

Desperately he fell to work again, mounting the magnet and tubes. Another hour went by, while I watched the shivering girl on the rock. Bobbed hair, wet and glistening, was plastered close against her head, and her clothing was torn half off. She looked utterly exhausted; it seemed to take all her ebbing energy to cling to the rock against the force of the wind and the waves that dashed against her. She looked cold, blue and trembling.

The water stood higher.

"The tide is rising!" Charlie exclaimed. "It will cover the rock pretty soon. If I don't get her off in time--she's lost!"
He finished twisting his wires together.

"I've got it all ready," he said. "Now, I've got to find out exactly where she is, to know how to set it. Even then it's fearfuly uncertain. I hate to try it, but it's the only chance.

"You can find out?"

"Yes. From the spectral shift and other factors. I'll have to get some other apparatus." He ran up to the laboratory, across the level field that lay black beneath the stars. He came back, panting, with spectrometer, terrestrial globe, and other articles.

"The tide is higher!" he cried as he looked through the blue-rimmed circle at the girl on the rock. "She'll be swept off before long!"

He mounted the spectrometer and fell to work with a will, taking observations through the telescope, adjusting prisms and diffraction gratings, reading electrometers and other apparatus, and stopping to make intricate calculations.

I helped him when I could, or stared through the ring of shining blue mist, where I could see the waves breaking higher about the exhausted girl who clung to the rock. Clouds of wind-whipped spray often hid her from sight. I knew that she would not have the strength to hold on much longer against the force of the rising sea.

Although driven almost to distraction by the horror of her predicament, he worked with a cool, swift efficiency. Only the pale, anxiety-drawn expression on his face showed how great was the strain. He finished the last spectrometer observation, snatched out a pad and fell to figuring furiously.

"Something queer here," he said presently, frowning. "A shift of the spectrum that I can't explain by distortion through three-dimensional space alone. I don't understand it."

We stared at the chilled and trembling girl on the rock.

"I'm almost afraid to try it. What if something went wrong?"

He turned to the terrestrial globe he had brought down and traced a line over it. He made a quick calculation on his pad, then made a fine dot on the globe with the pencil point.

"Here she is. On a rock some miles off Point Eugenia, on the coast of the Mexican State of Lower California. Most lonely spot in the world. No chance for a rescue. We must--"

"My god!" he screamed in sudden horror. "Look!"

I looked through the blue-ringed window and saw the girl. Green water was surging about her waist. It seemed that each wave almost tore her off. Then I saw that she was struggling with something. A great coiling tentacle, black and leathery and glistening, was thrust up out of the green water. It wavered deliberately through the air and grasped at the girl. She seemed to scream, though we could hear nothing. She beat at the monster, weakly, vainly.

"She's gone!" cried Charlie.

"An octopus!" I said. "A giant cuttlefish!"

Virginia made a sudden fierce effort. With a strength that I had not thought her chilled limbs possessed, she tore away from the dreadful creature and clambered higher on the rock. But still a hideous black tentacle clung about her ankle, tugging at her, drawing her back despite her desperate struggle to break free.

"I've got to try it!" Charlie said, determination flashing in his eyes. "It's a chance!"

He closed a switch. His new coils sung out above the old one. X-ray tubes flickered beside the blue fire that ringed the window. He adjusted his rheostats and closed the circuit through the new magnet.

A curtain of blue flame was drawn quickly between us and the round, fire-rimmed window. A huge ball of blue fire hung, about the meteorite and the instruments. For minutes it hung there, while Charlie, perspiring, worked desperately with the apparatus. Then it expanded; became huge. It exploded noiselessly, in a great flash of sapphire flame, then vanished completely.

Meteor, bench, and apparatus were gone!

In the light of the stars we could make out the huge crater the meteorite had torn, with a few odds and ends of equipment scattered about it. But all the apparatus Charlie had set up, connected with the meteoric stone, had disappeared.

He was dumbfounded, staggered with disappointment.

"Virginia! Virginia!" he called out, in a hopeless tone. "No, she isn't here. It didn't draw her through. I've failed. And we can't even see her any more!"

Desperately I searched for consolation for him.

"Maybe the octopus won't hurt her," I offered. "They say that most of the stories of their ferocity are somewhat exaggerated."
"If the monster doesn't get her, the tide will!" he said bitterly. "I made a miserable failure of it! And I don't know why! I can't understand it!"

Apathetically, he picked up his pad and held it in the light of his electric lantern.

"Something funny about this equation. The shift of the spectrum lines can't be accounted for by distortion through space alone."

With wrinkled brow, he stared for many minutes at the bit of paper he held in the white circle of light. Suddenly he seized a pencil and figured rapidly.

"I have it! The light was bent through time! I should have recognized these space-time coordinates."

He calculated again.

"Yes. The scene we saw in that circle of light was distant from us not only in space but in time. The Valhalla probably hasn't sunk yet at all. We were looking into the future!"

"But how can that be? Seeing things before they happen!"

I have the profoundest respect for Charlie King's mathematical genius. But when he said that I was frankly incredulous.

"Space and time are only relative terms. Our material universe is merely the intersection of tangled world lines of geodesics in a four-dimensional continuum. Space and time have no meaning independently of each other. Jeans says. 'A terrestrial astronomer may reckon that the outburst on Nova Persei occurred a century before the great fire of London, but an astronomer on the Nova may reckon with equal accuracy that the great fire occurred a century before the outburst on the Nova.' The field of this meteorite deflected light waves so that we saw them earlier, according to our conventional ideas of time, than they originated. We saw several hours into the future.

"And the amplified field of the magnet, though strong enough to move Virginia through space, was not sufficiently powerful to draw her back to us across time. Yet she must have felt the pull. Some dreadful thing may have happened. The problem is rather complicated."

* * * * *

He lifted his pencil again. In the glow of the little electric lantern I saw his lean young face tense with the fierce effort of his thought. His pencil raced across the little pad, setting down symbols that I could make nothing of.

My own thoughts were racing. Seeing into the future was a rather revolutionary idea to me. My mind is conservative; I have always been sceptical of the more fantastic ideas suggested by science. But Charlie seemed to know what he was talking about. In view of the marvelous things he had done that night, it seemed hardly fair to doubt him now. I decided to accept his astounding statement at face value and to follow the adventure through.

He lifted his pencil and consulted the luminous dial of his wrist watch.

"We saw that last scene some twelve hours and forty minutes before it happened--to put it in conventional language. The distortion of the time coordinates amounted to that."

In the light of dawn--for we had been all night at the meteor pit, and silver was coming in the east--he looked at me with fierce resolve in his eyes.

"Hammond, that gives us over twelve hours to get to Virginia!"

"You mean to go? But just twelve hours! That's better than the transcontinental record--to say nothing of the time it would take to find a little rock in the Pacific!"

"We have the Golden Gull! She's as fast as any ship we've ever flown."

"But we can't take the Gull! Those alterations haven't been made. And that new engine! A bear-cat for power, but it may go dead any second. The Gull can fly, but she isn't safe!"

"Safety be damned! I've got to get to Virginia, and get there in the next twelve hours!"

"The Gull will fly, but--"

"All right. Please help me get off!"

"Help you off? It's a fool thing to do! But if you go, I do!"

"Thanks, Hammond. Awfully!" He gripped my hand. "We've got to make it!"

* * * * *

With a last glance into the gaping pit from which we had dug the marvelous stone, we turned and ran across to the hangars. As we ran the sun came above the sea in the east: its first rays struck us like a fiery lance. The mechanics had not yet appeared. Charlie pushed the doors back, and we ran out the trim little Golden Gull, beautiful with her slender wing and her graceful, tapering lines.

I seized the starting crank and Charlie sprang into the cockpit. I cranked until the mechanism was droning dismally, and pulled the lever that engaged it with the engine. I had been in too much haste to get up the proper speed, and the powerful new engine failed to fire. Charlie almost cried with vexation while I was cranking again.

This time the motor coughed and fell into a steady, vibrant roar. With the wind from the propeller screaming about me, I disengaged the crank and stood waiting while the motor warmed. Charlie gave it scant time to do so
before he motioned me to kick out the blocks. I tumbled into the enclosed cockpit beside him, he gave the ship the gun, and we roared across the field.

In five minutes we were flying west, at a speed just under three hundred miles per hour. Charlie was crouched over the stick, scanning the instrument board, and flying the Gull almost at her top speed. Again and again his eyes went to the little clock on the panel.

"Twelve hours and forty minutes," he said. "And an hour gone already! We're got to be there by five minutes after six."

We were flying over Louisiana when the oil line clogged. The engine heated dangerously. Reluctantly, Charlie cut off the ignition, and fell in a swift spiral to an open field.

"We're got to fix it!" he said. "Another hour gone! And we needed every minute!"

"This new engine! It's powerful enough, but we should have had time to overhaul it, and make those changes."

Charlie landed with his usual skill, and we fell to work in desperate haste. A grizzled farmer, a wad of tobacco in his cheek and three ragged urchins at his heels, stopped to watch us. He had just been to his mailbox, and had a morning paper in his hand. Charlie questioned him about the storm.

"Storm-center nears the American coast," he read in a nasal drawl. "Greatest storm of year drives shipping upon west coast. Six vessels reported lost. S. V. Valhalla, disabled, sends S. O. S.

"A thousand lives are the estimated toll to-night of the most terrific storm of the year, which is sweeping toward the Pacific coast, driving all shipping before it. Radiograms from the Valhalla at 5 P. M. report that she is disabled and in danger. It is doubtful that rescue vessels can reach her through the storm."

"Five minutes to ten. Eight hours and ten minutes left, and we've got a darn long ways to go."

"Ten minutes lost!" Charlie complained as we took off. "And that monster--waiting in the future to drag Virginia to a hideous death!"

Two hours later the plane developed trouble in the ignition system. The motor was new, with several radical changes that we had introduced to increase power and lessen weight. As I had objected to Charlie, we had not done enough experimental work on it to perfect it.

We limped into the field at El Paso and spent another priceless half-hour at work. I got some sandwiches at a luncheon counter beside the field, and listened a moment to a radio loudspeaker there.

"Many thousands are dead," came the crisp, metallic voice of the announcer, "as a result of the storm now raging on the Pacific coast, the worst in several years. The storm-center is spending its force on the coastal regions, and millions of dollars in damage are reported in cities from San Francisco to Manzanillo, Mexico.

"The greatest disaster of the storm is the loss of the passenger liner Valhalla, of the Red Star Line. It is believed to have collided with the abandoned hulk of an Italian-owned tramp freighter, the Roma, which was left by its crew yesterday in a sinking condition. Radiograms from the liner ceased three hours ago, when she was said to be sinking. The officers doubted that her boats could be launched in such a sea--"

I waited to hear no more. Charlie checked our route while we were stopped. And we took off; we crossed the Rio Grande and flew across the rocky, brush-scattered hills of Mexico, in a direct line for the rock in the sea.

"If anything happens so we have to land again--well, it's just too bad," Charlie said grimly. "But we've got to go this way. It's something over six hundred miles in a straight line. Fifteen minutes to four, now. We have to average nearly three hundred miles an hour to get there."

He was silent and intent over his maps and instruments as we flew over the lofty Sierra Madre Range, and over a long slope down to the Gulf of California. Head-winds beset us as we were over the stretch of blue water, and we flew on into a storm.

"We had hardly time to make it, without the wind against us," Charlie said. "If it holds us back many miles--well, it just mustn't!"

Purple lightning flickered ominously in the mass of blue storm-clouds that hung above the mountainous peninsula of Lower California. I had a qualm about flying into it in our untested machine. But Charlie leaned tensely forward and sent the Golden Gull on at the limit of her speed. Gray vapor swirled about us, rent with livid streaks of lightning. Thunder crashed and rumbled above the roar of our racing engine. Wild winds screeched in the struts; rain and hail beat against us. The plane rose and fell; she was swirled about like a falling leaf. The stick struggled in Charlie's hands like a living thing. With lips tightened to a thin line, he fought silently, fiercely, desperately.

Suddenly we were sucked down until I had an uneasy feeling at the pit of my stomach. I saw the grim outline of
a bare mountain peak dangerously close below us, shrouded in wind-whipped mist.

In sudden alarm I shouted, "We'd better get out of this, Charlie! We can't live in it long!"

In the roar of the storm he did not hear me, and I shouted again.

He turned to face me, after a glance at the clock. "We've less than an hour, Hammond. We've got to go on!"

I sank back in my seat. The plane rolled and tossed until I thanked my lucky stars for the safety strap. In nervous anxiety I watched Charlie bring the ship up again, and fight his way on through the storm. For an eternity, it seemed, we battled through a chaos of wind-driven mist, bright with purple lightning and shaken with crashing thunder.

Charlie struggled with the controls until he was dripping with perspiration. He must have been utterly worn out, after thirty-six hours of exhausting effort. A dozen times I despaired of life. The compass had gone to spinning crazily; we dived through the rain until we could pick up landmarks below. Three times a great bare peak loomed suddenly up ahead of us, and Charlie averted collision only by zooming suddenly upward.

Then slate-gray water was beneath us, running in white-crested mountains. I knew that we were at last out over the Pacific.

"We've passed Point Eugenia," Charlie said. "It can't be far, now. But we have only fifteen minutes left. Fifteen minutes to get to her--before the attraction of the meteor jerks her away, perhaps to a horrible fate."

We flew low and fast over the racing waves. Charlie looked over his charts and made a swift calculation. He changed our course a bit and we flew on at top speed. We scanned the vast, mad expanse of sea below the blue-gray clouds. Here and there were lines of white breakers, but nowhere did we see a rock with a girl upon it. Presently the green outline of an island appeared out of the wild water on our right.

"That's Del Tiburon," Charlie said. "We missed the rock."

He swung the plane about and we flew south over the hastening waves. I looked at the little clock. It showed two minutes to six. I turned to Charlie.

"Seven minutes!" he whispered grimly.

On and on we flew, in a wide circle. The motor roared loud. An endless expanse of racing waves unreeled below us. The little hand crawled around the dial. One minute past six. Only four minutes to go.

We saw a speck of white foam on the mad gray water. It was miles away, almost on the horizon. We plunged toward it, motor bellowing loud. Five miles a minute we flew. The white fleck became a black rock smothered in snowy foam. On we swept, and over the rock, with bullet-like speed.

As we plunged by, I saw Virginia's slender form, tattered, brine-soaked, straggling in the hideous tentacles of the monster octopus. It was the same terrible scene that we had viewed, through the amazing phenomenon of distortion of light through space-time, four thousand miles away and twelve hours before.

In a few minutes the time would come when Charlie had ended our view of the scene by his attempt to draw the girl through the fourth dimension to our apparatus in Florida. What terrible thing might happen then?

Charlie brought the ship about so quickly that we were flung against the sides. Down we came toward the mad waves in a swift glide. In sudden apprehension, I dropped my hand on his shoulder.

"Man, you can't land in a sea like that! It's suicide!"

Without a word, he shook off my hand and continued our steep glide toward the rock. I drew my breath in apprehension of a crash.

I do not blame Charlie for what happened. He is as skilful a pilot as I know. It was a mad freak of the sea that did the thing.

The gray waste of mountainous, white-crested waves rose swiftly up to meet us, with the rock with the girl clinging to it just to our right. The Golden Gull struck the crest of a wave, buried herself in the foam, and plunged down the long slope to the trough. We rose safely to the crest of the oncoming roller, and I saw the black outline of the rock not a dozen yards away.

Charlie had landed with all his skill. It was not his fault that the blustering wind caught the ship as she reached the crest of the wave and flung her sidewise toward the rock. It is no fault of his that the white-capped mountain of racing green water completed what the wind had begun and hurled the frail plane crashing on the rock.

I have a confused memory of the wild plunge at the mercy of the wave, of my despair as I realized that we were being wrecked. I must have been knocked unconscious when we struck. The next I remember I was opening my eyes to find myself on the rock, Charlie's strong arm on my shoulder. I was soaked with icy brine and my head was aching from a heavy blow.

Virginia, shivering and blue, was perched beside us. I could see no sign of the plane: the mighty sea had swept away what was left of it. Clinging to the lee side of the rock I saw the black tentacles of the giant octopus--waiting
for a wave to dash us to its mercy.

"All right, Hammond?" Charlie inquired anxiously. "I'm afraid you got a pretty nasty bump on the head. About all I could do to fish you out before the Gull was swept away."

* * * * *

He helped me to a better position to withstand the force of the great roller that came plunging down upon us like a moving mountain. Virginia was in his arms, too exhausted to do more than cling to him.

"What can we do?" I sputtered, shaking water from my head.

"Not a thing! We're in a pretty bad fix, I imagine. In a few seconds we will feel the attraction of the meteor's field--the force with which I tried to draw Virginia to the crater through the fourth dimension. I don't know what will happen; we may be jerked out of space altogether. And if that doesn't get us, the tide and the octopus will!"

His voice was drowned in the roar of the coming wave. A mountain of water deluged us. Half drowned, I clung to the rock against the mad water.

Then blinding blue light flashed about me. A sharp crash rang in my ears, like splintering glass. I reeled, and felt myself falling headlong.

* * * * *

I brought up on soft sand.

I sat up, dumbfounded, and opened my eyes. I was sitting on the steep sandy tide of a conical pit. Charlie and Virginia were sprawled beside me, looking as astonished as I felt. Charlie got to his knees and lifted the limp form of the girl in his arms.

Something snapped in my brain. The sand-walled pit was suddenly familiar. I got to my feet and clambered out of it. I saw that we were on our own landing field.

Astonishingly, we were back in the meteor crater. Charlie's vanished apparatus was scattered about us. I saw the gray side of the rough iron meteorite itself, half-buried in the sand at the bottom of the pit.

"What--what happened?" I demanded of Charlie.

"Don't you see? Simple enough. I should have thought of it before. The field of the meteorite brought Virginia--and us--through to this point in space. But it could not bring us back through time; instead, the apparatus itself was jerked forward through time. That is why it vanished. We got here just twelve hours and forty minutes after I closed the switch, since we had been looking that far into the future. The mathematical explanation--"

"That's enough for me!" I said hastily. "We better see about a warm, dry bed for Virginia, and some hot soup or something."

* * * * *

Now the rough gray meteorite, in a neat glass case, rests above the mantel in the library of a beautiful home where I am a frequent guest. I was there one evening, a few days ago, when Charlie King fell silent in one of his fits of mathematical speculation.

"Einstein again?" I chaffingly inquired.

He raised his brown eyes and looked at me. "Hammond, since relativity enabled us to find the Meteor Girl, you ought to be convinced!"

Virginia--whom her husband calls the Meteor Girl--came laughingly to the rescue.

"Yes, Mr. Hammond, what do you think of Einstein now?"
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